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Preview

Whispersong’s face lit up with understanding. "It *is* a sign! For us; only we can hear it, and it was coming from the mountains!" Then she paused, and Echoheart stared at her. "It's calling us to the mountains, the whispers and echoes."

Echoheart blinked. A call? To the *mountains*?

Suddenly a voice whispered through the night, echoing ominously in both cats' ears. "Find the cats that live behind a waterfall, the cats that overpower eagles, the cats whose home forever lies in the mountains. Treacherous skies lay ahead, but it may be the Clans' only hope..."

Copyright

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This story is based on the *Warriors* world created by Erin Hunter. I do not own *Warriors*, but the names in the story are my own. Do not copy any parts of this story without permission.

Thank you, and enjoy reading!

Allegiances

DawnClan

Leader: ***Eveningstar***- large gray tom with tan flecks and a white underbelly

Deputy: ***Twigfoot***- dusty brown tom with pale green eyes

*Apprentice: Raypaw

Medicine Cat: ***Goldheart***- vibrant orange tabby tom with light orange eyes

*Apprentice: Yellowpaw

Warriors:

Bronzepelt- dark red-orange tom with lighter muzzle and yellow eyes

Creekfall- pale silver tabby tom with gray-green eyes

Eaglefeather- long-haired dark brown- and black-furred tom with yellow eyes

Echoheart- mottled dark gray she-cat with bright blue eyes

Gravelpelt- dark gray tabby tom with yellow eyes

Meadowheart- tortoiseshell and white she-cat with amber eyes

*Apprentice: Cloverpaw

Moonshine- white she-cat with silver flecks and pale green eyes

Prairiefoot- pale orange tabby tom with pale green eyes

*Apprentice: Hailpaw

Rustypelt- long-haired gray-brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Sparktail- red-brown she-cat with darker flecks, fluffy tail, and brown eyes

Sparrowtail- brown tabby she-cat with thin black stripes and white underbelly

Sunfur- orange-brown she-cat with black flecks and long black-tipped tail

Twilightfoot- large black tom with white muzzle, underbelly, and paws

Whispersong- light gray tabby she-cat with brown eyes

Apprentices:

Cloverpaw- black-furred she-cat with green eyes

Hailpaw- dark gray tom with a white underbelly and blue eyes

Raypaw- large orange tabby tom with orange eyes

Yellowpaw- light orange tabby she-cat with white muzzle and green eyes

Queens:

Aspenleaf- cream-furred she-cat with pale green eyes (mother of Creekfall's kits: *Pinekit*- dark brown tabby tom-kit with white underbelly, *Rosekit*- cream-furred she-kit, *Needlekit*- pale silver tabby tom-kit, and *Tulipkit*- small orange tabby she-kit)

Sagetail- cream-furred she-cat with blue-gray eyes (mother of Bronzepelt's kits)

Elders:

Copperleaf- orange-brown tom with darker brown muzzle and ears

Ferrettail- dark brown tom with bright green eyes

Spruceclaw- dark brown tom with lighter brown underbelly and yellow eyes

DayClan

Leader: ***Rainstar***- white she-cat with black patches and icy-blue eyes

Deputy: ***Heatpool***- gray-brown tabby tom with red-brown underbelly

Medicine Cat: ***Lilyfoot***- white she-cat with dark gray and light brown tabby patches

*Apprentice: Fernpaw

Warriors:

Applefang- red-orange tom with white muzzle and pale green eyes

Bumblefrost- large brown tabby tom with light green eyes

Burningwood- dark red-brown tom with pale yellow eyes

Cougarfang- light brown tom with dusky brown flecks and a white muzzle

Foxfang- dark orange tabby tom with white muzzle and orange eyes

Frostwhisker- white she-cat with pale blue-gray eyes

Songtail- gray-brown tabby she-cat with white underbelly, muzzle, and paws

Weedfoot- small light brown tabby tom with teal eyes

Apprentices:

Fernpaw- small white tom with a red and black tabby tail

DuskClan

Leader: ***Orangestar***- ginger- and white-patched tom with orange eyes

Deputy: ***Falconflight***- mottled light brown and dark brown tabby tom

Medicine Cat: ***Crystalheart***- white she-cat with bright blue eyes

Warriors:

Blizzardclaw- large white tom with yellow eyes

Gingerfur- dark ginger and white she-cat with white paws

*Apprentice: Snowpaw

Mushroomcloud- pale brown she-cat with a darker face and tail

Pantherclaw- large black tom with dark amber eyes

Petalheart- white she-cat with pale orange stripes and teal eyes

Apprentices:

Raccoonpaw- long-haired white tom with dark brown tabby tail and brown ears

Snowpaw- silver and black tabby she-cat with white muzzle and underbelly

Elders:

Fallingrain- dark gray tabby tom with teal eyes

Pidgeonclaw- long-haired gray tom with gray eyes

NightClan

Leader: ***Beechstar***- pale ginger tabby tom with teal eyes

Deputy: ***Mapleleaf***- ginger tom with dark orange eyes

Medicine Cat: ***Bushtail***- long-haired pale ginger tom with a fluffy tail

*Apprentice: Icedapple

Warriors:

Cliffsand- pale ginger she-cat with light blue eyes

Duckflight- brown tabby tom with lighter flecks, cream muzzle, and green eyes

Goosefur- dark brown tabby tom with white underbelly and dark green eyes

Larksong- small dark brown tabby she-cat with black stripes

Pebbletail- black- and white-patched she-cat with a fluffy tail

Robintail-black tom with orange patches

Swantail- long-haired white she-cat with a fluffy tail

Apprentices:

Icedapple- pale silver and white tabby she-cat with pale blue eyes

Queens:

Brownear- white she-cat with brown patches (mother of *Flowerkit* and *Ripplekit*)

Ravenheart- small black she-cat

Cats outside Clans

Cosmo- long-haired black tom with white underbelly and muzzle

(kittypet)

Hazel- light gray-brown she-cat with teal eyes (kittypet)

Magpie- black- and white-patched she-cat with green eyes (loner)

Pansy- light brown tabby she-cat with teal eyes (kittypet)

River- dark gray tom with yellow eyes (kittypet)

Rye- light ginger tom with dark amber eyes (loner)

Prologue

Far away from the forest, high in the mountains, a dark brown tabby tom sat alone in the darkness of a cave deep within the mountains. His body shook from the cold. Even though his den was in the very back of the cave, the freezing weather still penetrated through the rocky walls. His whiskers twitched as he heard the sound of kits' scuffling paws outside his den; despite the cold, they still played.

He sat in silence, lost in his own thoughts.

The brown tom twisted his head as he heard the sound of pawsteps approaching his den. Any cat who did not live here would have never heard the quiet sounds of the cat's footsteps above the roaring of the waterfall outside the cave. But since the brown tom had lived here his whole life, the roaring had died down to a gentle lulling, until he hardly heard it.

A small silver she-cat stepped through the entrance to his cave. "Good evening." The she-cat politely dipped her head. "You have summoned me?"

"Indeed, I have," replied the tom in his deep, husky voice.

"And what is it that you need? Screech needs me on his hunting party, and everyone needs food. It is the season of frozen water." The she-cat sounded impatient.

"Patience, Rain. Another cat can take your place if needed. I need to confide to you in something our ancestors told me a few dawns ago. I've thought through it and concluded that you'd be the best cat to tell this to. I can't just go on not telling someone."

Rain stood shocked at what he had just said. *Me? The best cat to tell something to?* "I'm not sure I know what you mean," she managed to get out.

The brown tom chuckled. "Oh, Rain. You always were the humble one of your kin. That is why I have to tell it to you."

Rain flicked her ears in embarrassment. Then she straightened up. "Alright, if that's what you wish."

He nodded, pleased. "A few nights ago, I visited the Cave of Pointed Stones, and our ancestors came to me in a dream." Rain blinked in curiosity, but she said nothing as the brown tabby continued. "They told me that a group of foreign cats would visit us soon, seeking our help. Their ancestors told this to ours: that these ancestral cats' kin are in trouble. This warning, this... visit we'll be getting, is going to affect us all, the foreign cats and us."

Rain stood motionless, staring at the dark brown tabby tom in front of her. "What? A different group of cats will come to us?"

"Apparently."

"And they have *different* ancestors in a *different* sky?"

He shrugged. "That's what our ancestors told me."

"B-But that can't be right!" Rain couldn't believe how there could be anything other than their very own ancestors! What other unknown things lay out there? Her mind was spinning uncontrollably, and she became dizzy and lightheaded.

"I just wanted to tell you, Rain. I just needed to confide in someone; I don't like having a secret trapped inside me." He paused. "Now, Screech will need your help hunting."

Rain nodded distractedly. She stumbled across the cave, hardly thinking of hunting anymore.

"And Rain, I expect you won't repeat this conversation to any cat," the brown tabby tom meowed with an edge to his voice.

Rain nodded weakly. "Of course not."

"Good." He watched the befuddled silver she-cat leave the cave, then he turned, sighed, and laid his head down on the cold stone

floor. His yellow eyes, dark in the shadows, flickered shut shortly afterwards.

Chapter 1

Echoheart shivered as she saw the sun slowly rising above the horizon. The feathery clouds high in the sky glowed bright orange, and the forest shone with a soft yellow glow. A cold breeze swept across the camp, chilling Echoheart to the bones. Echoheart sat beside Whispersong, her sister, in their silent vigil. They had just been made warriors last night, and the thrill of it still clung to Echoheart's whole body.

Soon enough, the Clan started to wake. The sunrays reached down into the camp, warming Echoheart from head to tail. Echoheart turned to look over her shoulder and saw Sparktail and Moonshine emerging from the warriors' den, while Twigfoot, the deputy, followed. Eveningstar stretched up on the High-stone, then leapt down to join is deputy by the tiny fresh-kill pile. Hailpaw and Cloverpaw came running out of the apprentices' den, racing over to their mentors, Prairiefoot and Meadowheart. The two elders, Spruceclaw and Ferrettail, slowly walked out into the sun, then sat down to share tongues.

Despite the peace and happiness Echoheart felt from her warrior ceremony, she knew DawnClan was struggling this leaf-bare. The fresh-kill pile only consisted of a small mouse and three birds. Hailpaw and Cloverpaw weren't running excitedly toward their mentors, they were hurrying to hunt for their hungry Clan. Eveningstar and Twigfoot were talking in hushed voices, then each volunteered to lead a hunting patrol, with Rustypelt, Eaglefeather, Raypaw, Sunfur, and Creekfall right behind them.

"Your vigil's over," meowed a voice behind Echoheart. Echoheart turned around and saw Bronzepelt, her former mentor, padding toward the two newest warriors. "You may talk now."

"Brrr!" Whispersong instantly exclaimed.

Bronzepelt purred in amusement. "Now, I expect you're tired, so you may go and rest in the warriors' den. You'll find that your moss has

already been moved there."

"But the Clan needs to be fed!" Echoheart protested. "Are you sure you don't want me to join a hunting patrol or...?"

Bronzepelt shook his head. "No, we have enough warriors out hunting right now. You two need to sleep." Echoheart nodded and watched as her former mentor padded away toward Sagetail, his mate, urging her into the nursery.

"Come on," yawned Whispersong. "I'm so tired I could sleep for the next moon!"

Echoheart nodded, yawning too.

Together, the two new warriors padded into their new den, curled up on their moss nests, and closed their eyes. Soon Echoheart fell into a deep sleep, her dreams filled with sunshine and green trees: a time when DawnClan would be better fed.

* * *

A moon and a half passed, and the Clan still didn't have enough food; the leaf-bare seemed to be getting colder and harsher with each passing day, driving all the prey into hiding. Echoheart hunted nearly every day; but most of the time, she didn't have much luck, and neither did the rest of the Clan.

At least DayClan isn't giving DawnClan any trouble. Echoheart thought. *They must still be demanding hunting rights in NightClan territory*.

Echoheart shook her head to clear her thoughts and continued to trudge through the snow, Whispersong and Sparrowtail close behind her. The sun was setting to their left as they headed back to the camp after a long day of hunting.

"Tonight is the Gathering," Sparrowtail pointed out, nodding to the right. The full moon rose above the horizon, glowing yellow as it slowly floated higher into the graying sky.

"Do you think Eveningstar will take us to the Gathering?"

Whispersong asked.

"I think he will," Sparrowtail meowed, jumping over a fallen log covered in snow. "He usually takes new warriors, and since he didn't choose you last time, I'm sure you'll go this time."

Echoheart's paws tingled. Her first Gathering as a warrior!

By the time the three reached the camp with one piece of prey between the three of them, the sun had completely disappeared. The Clan was gathered around the base of the High-stone, listening as Eveningstar announced who the Gathering patrol would be.

"...choose the Gathering patrol. I'll take Twigfoot," he was meowing, "Sunfur, Rustypelt, Eaglefeather, Meadowheart..." He paused, sweeping his brown gaze across the clearing. "Goldheart, Yellowpaw, Echoheart, Whispersong, and Raypaw."

"Yay!" squealed Raypaw, sitting to Echoheart's right. Echoheart twitched her whiskers in amusement, then watched as Eveningstar leapt off the High-stone and head toward Spruceclaw and whispered, "I need you to keep a close eye on Ferrettail. He's getting weaker."

"Of course, Eveningstar," Spruceclaw dipped his head, then headed back into his den.

Eveningstar nodded, then turned. "Let's go!" he called, leading the way out of camp.

Echoheart followed her leader, padding beside Whispersong and Rustypelt while they trudged through the silvery-white snow that sparkled in the moonlight. Echoheart looked up at the stars glittering against the black sky. A cold breeze blew from the moor and across the meadow as the patrol reached the river, and they carefully leaped across the stepping-stones and walked beside the Thunderpath on DayClan's territory.

"Great," Echoheart heard Eaglefeather mutter.

Echoheart turned to the right and gazed across the moor at a group of cats, heading right towards them. Echoheart sighed inwardly as

she recognized them: the DayClan Gathering patrol. A white she-cat with black patches was at the head of it. Echoheart shivered as she instantly recognized her.

As Rainstar neared them, Echoheart noticed that she was quite plump, more so than the rest of DayClan. She wondered with horror how much prey they were actually taking, and why Rainstar was eating more of it than her Clanmates. Her ice-blue gaze swept over the DawnClan cats, and Echoheart felt chills racing down her spine.

"Hello, Eveningstar." Rainstar smiled mockingly. She paused as Eveningstar gave her a curt nod with narrowed eyes. "Cats of DayClan, we will be giving these cats an escort to the Pointed Mountain. It looks like they need it," she sneered. A few cats behind her snickered, and Echoheart recognized Songtail, Burningwood, and Heatpool. Echoheart felt her neck fur rising, and her claws slid out, digging into the dirt.

"And who says you can order us around?" growled Meadowheart.

"You *are* on our territory," Applefang snapped.

"It's the night of the full moon. How do you expect us to reach the Pointed Mountain if we can't cross through DayClan territory? StarClan demands that every Clan attends," Eveningstar pointed out. His voice was neutral, but Echoheart knew he was furious.

"Oh." Rainstar acted surprised. "I didn't say that I don't want you there; we don't want to upset our warrior ancestors, right? No, we're just concerned that you won't be able to get there."

Echoheart let out a low growl, and Whispersong hissed under her breath beside her. Echoheart could feel the fury among all of her Clanmates around her, each with bristled pelts and lashing tails. But none dared break the full-moon truce.

"You poor starving fools probably wouldn't make it halfway across our territory," Songtail sneered. Rainstar looked angered at the interruption, but let the young warrior continue anyway. "Looking at your condition, you probably haven't eaten in what, a moon?" Cats around Songtail laughed.

"The only reason you're so fat is because you're taking prey from NightClan that rightfully belongs to them," Eaglefeather burst out with a snarl, and the DawnClan cats all nodded in agreement, their eyes narrowed.

"Oh," Rainstar purred in laughter. "I see. Standing up for NightClan, now? Are they so weak that you feel pity in your tiny hearts?"

"The only cats with tiny hearts are you!" growled a voice beside Echoheart. Echoheart turned in surprise to find that Raypaw had said that.

"Aw! A wee little apprentice, how wise! I'm quivering with fear!" she taunted. Then she narrowed her eyes at Eveningstar, and snarled, "You *will* let us escort you, and there's no way for you to stop us. You don't want to break the sacred truce, do you?" She smiled, her mouth twisting. "Each of you," she turned to her Clan. "Walk beside a DawnClan cat, and help them to the Gathering."

Immediately the DayClan patrol broke up, walking into the group of DawnClan cats. Lilyfoot and Fernpaw padded over to Goldheart and Yellowpaw, murmuring something that sounded like an apology.

Echoheart watched as Weedfoot stood beside her, his head raised proudly.

"You're not that great, you know? No cat respects you," Echoheart growled.

"No one asked for your opinion," he retorted bitterly, pushing his face up to hers.

"Stay away from me," she hissed, heart pounding.

"Oh, and what's a little apprentice like yourself going to do about it?" he sneered.

"I'm *not* an apprentice," Echoheart growled, feeling her fur bristle.

"Oh, I'm sorry, you must be a kit then!"

Echoheart's anger snapped. "No, you stupid excuse for a cat! I'm a

warrior! DayClan cats must have fleas for brains if you think a cat the size of me is a kit!"

Weedfoot looked surprised at her outburst, but hissed, "*I'm* escorting *you*, and I'm older. You will listen to me!"

"And who's going to make me?" She lifted her chin defiantly, her eyes level to his.

Before he could answer, Rainstar called, "Let's go!" in a mock-happy voice.

Echoheart walked near Weedfoot at first, but slowly drifted away from him. No cat can boss me around! she thought.

She looked up and saw Bumblefrost walking beside Whispersong, meowing something quietly in her ear. Whispersong gave him a stern look, and something flashed between them. But a heartbeat later, it was gone, and Bumblefrost nodded curtly, escorting Whispersong across the moor. Just then Songatil came running up beside her brother and shoved Whispersong away. Whispersong lost her balance and fell over, rolling in the dirt. "Stay away from him!" Songtail growled at Whispersong, glaring at her through narrowed gray eyes.

Echoheart raced to her sister's side.

"Are you alright?" Echoheart asked.

Whispersong nodded. "I'm fine," she meowed, getting to her feet once more.

"Why does Songtail hate you so much?" Echoheart asked her sister.

"StarClan knows," she growled, following Echoheart across the moor, which was surrounded by DayClan cats. Echoheart saw Eveningstar at the front, but Rainstar passed him and growled something at him. Eveningstar flattened his ears, but didn't protest, not wanting to start a fight or break the truce of peace on the night of the full moon.

Echoheart looked behind her. The four medicine cats, Goldheart,

Yellowpaw, Lilyfoot, and Fernpaw, walked at the very back, talking to each other like good friends. Echoheart sighed; she wished the rest of the Clans would act like that. Although, if DayClan had, she wouldn't have believed it; DayClan cats were as stubborn as a badger in leaf-bare.

Echoheart sighed and padded forward, noticing movement to her right. She turned her head and saw Cougarfang, Burningwood, and a young orange tom Echoheart recognized from the battle walking a few fox-lengths from her, whispering to one another.

"Cougarfang," The orange tabby tom hissed in the tan-furred warrior's ear. "How was the prey on NightClan territory?"

Cougarfang looked at the grass as he walked. Then he looked up at the two warriors beside him and meowed something Echoheart couldn't catch.

"Nice work yesterday, by the way, Foxfang," Burningwood addressed the orange tom. "It really helped out for today too. But, tomorrow we'll have to—" Cougarfang cut him off with a nudge, glaring at Echoheart. The three DayClan warriors turned to her and curled their lips. Echoheart raised her chin and gave an indignant sniff, and continued walking beside her sister.

Once they had reached the edge of DayClan's territory, Eveningstar stopped. "We are no longer on your territory. We have no need for you to escort us anymore," he meowed stiffly.

"We had no need in the first place," muttered Rustypelt to Echoheart's left.

Rainstar looked angered, but she dipped her head. "Fine," she meowed curtly, and spun around, walking away from the DawnClan cats and toward the Pointed Mountain, which lay straight ahead. Eveningstar waited for them to get further ahead, then he lead the way through the grassland and up the rocky slope of the Pointed Mountain. Rustypelt, Twigfoot, and Sunfur walked side by side, shaking their heads and lashing their tails. Echoheart could sense anger coming from them, and guessed they were talking about DayClan.

At the top of the Pointed Mountain, Echoheart saw that DuskClan and NightClan were already there. She noticed how thin the NightClan cats were, and she hoped Beechstar would finally make Rainstar stop hunting on his territory. One of the NightClan cats, a dark gray tom, was coughing, and Larksong, a dark brown NightClan she-cat, was comforting him. His shoulders shook and his nose was crusted. Echoheart swallowed nervously; she wasn't a medicine cat, but she knew that that gray tom was sick, and she prayed to StarClan that it wasn't whitecough or greencough.

To the left of them were two DuskClan elders, one a brown tabby with large ears and the other a gray and black tabby tom with teal eyes. Echoheart recognized the latter from the fox battle on the night of the Gathering a few moons ago: Fallingrain. Unfortunately the old tom looked weak, and the elder beside him was hunched over, his eyes distant.

Echoheart gazed a little more to the left and saw Cliffsand and Pebblepaw sitting beside Snowpaw and Raccoonpaw. Echoheart noticed, with a pang of sadness, that Cliffsand and Pebblepaw were really thin like the rest of their Clanmates, which meant DayClan was definitely taking more prey than they should.

Echoheart turned to tell Whispersong that she was going to talk to the four young cats, but her sister was gone. Echoheart looked around in worry, then she shook her head. *She's a warrior; she can take care of herself.* Echoheart turned again and walked over to the group of DuskClan and NightClan cats.

"Echopaw!" called Cliffsand.

"Actually, it's Echo*heart* now," Echoheart purred proudly.

Pebblepaw snorted in annoyance as she saw Echoheart, but Echoheart ignored her.

"Oh! You're a warrior now!" Snowpaw exclaimed.

"This annoying furball over here is now called Pebbletail," Cliffsand purred, nudging her friend playfully.

Pebbletail rolled her eyes, ears flattened, then gazed across the clearing to where Larksong, Robintail, and another cat were sitting, all NightClan warriors. Pebbletail got up and, looking only at Cliffsand, meowed, "I'm going to sit by them."

Cliffsand nodded, then turned back to the rest of them once more. "So how is it being a warrior?" she purred to Echoheart.

"Hard," Echoheart sighed. "Especially with leaf-bare. It's really tough in DawnClan this season."

Cliffsand nodded. "NightClan too."

"How are Brownear's three kits? They're almost ready to be apprenticed, aren't they?" Raccoonpaw asked.

Cliffsand lowered her gaze to her paws and flattened her ears. "Close. But Tumblekit died a quarter-moon ago, and the other two are really weak. We lost two elders too: Greenwood and Fawnbreeze."

Echoheart rested her tail on Cliffsand's back. "I'm sorry," she murmured, even though she had no idea who Greenwood and Fawnbreeze were.

"Have you lost any cats?" Cliffsand asked quietly.

Echoheart shook her head. "No, unless you count Fogtail. But that was from a fox, not hunger. Ferrettail.... hasn't been eating much since Fogtail died, and he's so thin. I'm afraid he'll catch whitecough, then it'll spread to the rest of the Clan."

Cliffsand nodded. "I know," she meowed solemnly. "That's Bushtail's worst fear. One cat with whitecough, and the whole Clan would get sick, and many would die, especially with our prey losses." Cliffsand closed her eyes.

Snowpaw had her ears flattened. "One of our elders, Pidgeonclaw, died this past half-moon as well."

Raccoonpaw nodded sadly and added, "The only kits we have at the moment are very weak, but they're three moons old, and they

should survive to be apprentices."

Snowpaw nodded solemnly, eyes lowered.

There was a silence.

"Alright!" yowled a voice from above. Echoheart turned and saw Beechstar sitting on one of the branches of the Lightning Tree, every one of his bones showing through his pale ginger fur. "Let's start this Gathering!"

Echoheart turned to face the leaders.

"Orangestar, would you like to go first?" Beechstar rasped.

Orangestar dipped his head. "Thank you." He sat taller, then yowled, "DuskClan is doing fine this leaf-bare. Prey is scarce, of course, but what's new? We lost one of our elders this past moon: Pidgeonclaw. We hope he finds peace in StarClan."

Silence fell over the clearing, and the DuskClan cats bowed their heads low.

"We also have some good news," Orangestar continued. "We have named a new warrior as well. Pantherpaw is now known as Pantherclaw."

"Pantherclaw! Pantherclaw!" the cats in the clearing called out, loudest from the DuskClan patrol. Echoheart saw the black tom raise his head, his amber eyes shining with pride.

"That's all I have," Orangestar meowed, sitting back so the other leaders could speak.

Eveningstar stepped forward now. "Although prey has been scarce," he worded his sentence carefully, "we have welcomed two new warriors. Echopaw and Whisperpaw are known as Echoheart and Whispersong, and sleep with the other warriors now."

"Echoheart! Whispersong!" the Clans cheered, and Rustypelt was the loudest, cheering for his daughters. Echoheart held her head high and closed her eyes, taking it all in. Then, sooner than Echoheart

expected, it was over, and Eveningstar was continuing.

"Other than that," Eveningstar yowled again. "I have nothing to report."

Now Rainstar stepped forward, her icy-blue eyes narrowed. Echoheart was surprised that she hadn't suggested she speak first. "Prey is running well for us, and we are having more kits in the Clan," Rainstar continued with pride, a warm glow in her blue eyes that Echoheart had never thought was possible in the DayClan leader. Then it was gone and she added mockingly, "We have grown strong."

"Only because of *our* prey!" sneered a NightClan cat; Echoheart recognized Duckflight among the crowd.

"Yes, you certainly don't need to hunt on our territory anymore," Beechstar meowed.

"No, we won't; although leaf-bare has set in, our territory and our Clan have fully recovered from the flooding. DayClan thanks you for letting us hunt in you territory for so long, Beechstar; it was so kind of you," meowed Rainstar. Echoheart stared at the DayClan leader in surprise; her thanks had been so mocking!

"Good," growled Beechstar. Then he turned to face the rest of the Clans in the clearing. "We have named a new warrior in the past moon as well: Pebblepaw is now Pebbletail." The clearing called out the new NightClan warrior's name. "And, sadly, one of Brownear's first litter and two of our elders have joined StarClan as well. We hope that they made it safely to StarClan's hunting grounds."

All the cats in the clearing lowered their heads, except a few from DayClan. The loss of kits was heart-wrenching, even for cats not in that Clan.

"Now," Beechstar turned to Rainstar, "you and your Clan will stay to your own territory. If any of my Clan finds that you've been on our territory after tonight, they have my permission to chase you off with teeth and claws."

"Yeah, right," Echoheart heard Songtail mutter, and Burningwood, her former mentor, nodded in agreement. "I'd like to see them try," she sneered.

Rainstar dipped her head. "Of course," she meowed politely.

Beechstar looked sideways at her, his ears twitching in suspicion, and Echoheart knew that he too was wondering why Rainstar was agreeing so easily and willingly.

Suddenly Rainstar leapt off her branch without another word and headed off towards her Clanmates. Eveningstar and Beechstar exchanged confused glances as Rainstar walked away, already heading back to her territory. The other three leaders leapt off the Lightning Tree, padding off to their own patrols once again and saying quick goodbyes.

Cliffsand flicked her tail. "Bye," she meowed.

Echoheart blinked in acknowledgement, then turned to say goodbye to Snowpaw and Raccoonpaw, and went to find Whispersong.

Chapter 2

Whispersong followed Bumblefrost through a patch of sage and raspberry bushes behind the Lightning Tree. The Gathering had just broken up, and they had snuck off to say a last goodbye to each other. They hadn't seen each other at all the past moon, so they'd been unable to arrange a meeting in their secret clearing. Whispersong had missed him more than she should have, especially with leaf-bare to worry about, but she couldn't stop thinking about him, no matter what she told herself.

Bumblefrost turned around. "Sorry again about Songtail earlier. She can be rude."

Whispersong nodded dismissively.

"You will meet me in our clearing in five moonrises, won't you?" Bumblefrost asked, his pale green eyes shining. When they'd arrived at the Pointed Mountain, Bumblefrost had led Whispersong to their cave, where'd they'd played CaveClan the first time, and Bumblefrost had asked her to meet him again soon.

"Of course," Whispersong purred. "How could I not?" She blinked in warmth.

Bumblefrost let out a low purr, then rubbed his muzzle on her head. "I'll miss you."

"Me too," Whispersong meowed quietly.

"I'll see you in five moonrises," Bumblefrost whispered. Then suddenly he drew away and lifted lift his nose into the air. "Someone's com—," he hissed, but before he could say any more, a cat burst through the bushes.

Bumblefrost stiffened, and Whispersong felt utterly exposed as she saw who it was.

"We're leav—" Echoheart began in an exasperated tone, but she cut off her sentence as she saw Whispersong and Bumblefrost, just a mouse-length apart. She narrowed her eyes in confusion and anger. "What is he doing here with you?"

Bumblefrost flattened his black ears and let out a low growl, but Whispersong silenced him, resting her tail on his flank. "I can handle this," she whispered, praying he wouldn't leap out at her sister.

Bumblefrost hissed at Echoheart, then quickly got to his paws, his thick black tail lashing. He stormed toward the bushes, glaring at Echoheart. But Echoheart held her head high, narrowing her eyes at the DayClan warrior. Bumblefrost didn't stop, and, as he walked past, he drew back his lips, revealing his sharp teeth. His pelt was twice its size, and his usually soft green eyes were dark and full of hatred. Whispersong gulped; she'd never seen this side of Bumblefrost before.

Once he'd gone, Echoheart turned her blue gaze back to Whispersong. "Explain," she growled. Then she lowered her voice. "I should've known; I knew you'd snuck out of camp a moon and a half ago, and before that as well; I knew *something* was amiss..." she muttered to herself. Then she looked up at Whispersong. "So?" she prompted with a growl rumbling in her throat.

"You're not my leader," Whispersong hissed. "You can't make me tell you *anything*."

"No, but I am your sister," Echoheart growled, then her voice softened. "We used to share everything, do everything together; we never kept secrets."

"Yeah?" Whispersong growled, her ears flattened. "Well that time has gone."

"What happened to who we used to be?" Echoheart persisted. "We were so close, and we always told each other what was wrong, what was on our minds."

Whispersong flattening her ears and narrowed her eyes. "We're not

kits anymore. Besides, I can take care of myself."

"You obviously can't," Echoheart growled, flattening her own ears now. "If you think being with... with him is alright, then you're sure acting like a kit! Doesn't Clan loyalty mean anything to you?"

Whispersong felt stung. She let out a growl, filled with pain and anger. "I never was disloyal, and never will be!"

"Being with a cat from another Clan in secret is disloyal; it's against the warrior code! Come on Echoheart, you can't meet in secret with that cat, that DayClan cat, for StarClan's sake!"

Whispersong didn't need Echoheart to tell her that! Whispersong knew it was against the warrior code; she'd known that from the beginning. But seeing Bumblefrost every now and then didn't make her disloyal to her Clan, right? She wasn't betraying DawnClan! And besides, she couldn't stop seeing him now; they were too close of friends to say goodbye now!

"You need to stop your friendship with that cat; you should have never even started it! It should be easy, and it'll be for the good of both of you,and for both of your Clans. He's not your Clanmate; just tell him to leave you alone and then you can both move on—"

"I can't say that! What do you know about our friendship, about being torn—"

"I don't know anything about that, and I never will, because *I* am staying loyal to my Clan, unlike you; no other cat outside of DawnClan deserves my loyalty."

Whispersong glared at Echoheart, shaking slightly. She felt as though Echoheart had raked her claws across her chest and punctured her heart. Whispersong *was* staying loyal! She always had been and she always would be! How dare Echoheart suggest that Whispersong, of all cats, was disloyal!

Echoheart's voice lowered, but she growled firmly, "Whispersong, I know you're better than this. I'm trying to help y—"

"I don't want your help; I don't need your help!" Whispersong

hissed, breathing roughly and still shaking with anger and with the feeling of betrayal, betrayal from her own sister. "I don't need *you* !"

A look of pain filled Echoheart's face, then she narrowed her eyes. "Why can't you use your common sense, Whispersong? You know how what consequences come out of things like... this. But I guess you're too blind to see it. I will stop you two from seeing each other, for the sake of DawnClan. And if that means telling Eveningstar, then I will."

Whispersong let out a low growl even though fear flashed through her as her sister said this. *She wouldn't tell Eveningstar!*

She lashed her tail, then launched herself at Echoheart, claws extended and teeth bared. She landed on Echoheart's back and clawed at the mottled gray tabby fur on her shoulders. She felt blood well up on her paws, staining them dark crimson. Echoheart shrieked, then pulled herself away from Whispersong. Whispersong let her go, then hissed at her, back arched.

Echoheart turned around, and half-growled, half-sobbed, "You're not the same cat I used to know; the one who taught me what it meant to be loyal, the one who helped me through the weight of the prophecy. You're not my sister." With that she spun around and ran through the bushes, her pawsteps soon fading.

Whispersong stood there, her bloodied claws rooted to the ground and her flanks heaving. Her eyes were still narrowed and her tail was still lashing angrily. But then she sat down, shoulders suddenly shaking, and let the tears flow.

What have I done?

* * *

Whispersong woke up in the warriors' den, Sparrowtail beside her. Her friend's tongue ran along her neck fur, smoothing it down. The sky was still dark, and the full moon was sinking toward the horizon; dawn wouldn't be far off.

Whispersong looked to the left; Echoheart's nest was empty. She

swiveled her ears around and heard her sister's voice outside the den.

"What happened? Did you fight with someone? You know that's against the will of StarClan!" Goldheart sounded horrified. Whispersong guessed he was looking at her wounds; the wounds Whispersong had given her. Whispersong waited in silence, straining to hear her sister answer the medicine cat.

"No," Whispersong heard her meow. Whispersong had to hold back a jolt of surprise. She'd lied! Of course she'd had a fight!

"What? How?" Goldheart asked, and Whispersong detected suspicion in his voice.

"Whispersong and I, well, we were taking a walk around the Pointed Mountain," Echoheart began, trying to format the lie smoothly.

Whispersong blinked; her sister was keeping hers and Bumblefrost's secret! Maybe Echoheart did still care about her after all.

"I... I slipped on some loose rocks, and Whispersong... well she grabbed me, but her claws dug too deep. But if it weren't for her clawing at my back," Echoheart fake-laughed, "then I'd have fallen and broken something for sure."

There was a pause, as if Goldheart was digesting what Echoheart had just said. Then he spoke again. "Well, nonetheless, I need to treat you. Come on." Whispersong heard their footsteps fade away as the two headed for the medicine cats den.

Whispersong sighed in relief. Her sister had kept her mouth shut, even though she'd promised to tell Eveningstar last night. But how much longer would Echoheart cover for her?

* * *

"Come on!" called Twilightfoot. He, Copperleaf, Meadowheart, Cloverpaw, and Whispersong were the dawn patrol. They were out in the meadow, and Twilightfoot was renewing the scent-marker by the river. Meadowheart was meowing something to Cloverpaw, who

was nodding eagerly.

Whispersong sighed, then followed the four cats downstream as they headed toward the NightClan border. She watched her paws drag in the brown grass, the snow from the last storm having melted over a half-moon ago already. It hadn't snowed since, but the weather was just as cold and the prey was just as scarce.

Whispersong looked up as Cloverpaw fell back to walk beside her. "What is it?" the black she-cat asked, knowing that something was bothering her.

Whispersong shrugged. "Oh, I... I don't know," she sighed.

Cloverpaw didn't press her, but continued to walk beside her.

Soon they reached the Thunderpath, the monsters roaring along its hard black surface. Whispersong prepared herself for the odor, and wrinkled her nose in disgust when it finally reached her.

"Yuck!" Cloverpaw spat.

"You can say that again," muttered Meadowheart, her ears flattened.

Whispersong looked up as a gray monster raced past, its black paws carrying it forward and off into the distance. She gazed across the Thunderpath, and a flash of ginger fur caught her eye. She narrowed her eyes and stared in surprise as Mapleleaf, the NightClan deputy, raced across the Thunderpath, with Bushtail and Icepaw, the NightClan medicine cats, close behind.

"Twilightfoot!" Mapleleaf called, pausing as he stepped onto DawnClan territory. "We come in peace." Whispersong noticed that his ribs were clearly visible beneath his ginger fur, and she felt a pang of sympathy, knowing how much NightClan had suffered the past moon.

Twilightfoot narrowed his eyes. "What do you want, Mapleleaf?"

"We need your Clan's help." He was begging.

Bushtail stepped forward. "Whitecough broke out in NightClan. One

of our warriors is really weak, and we do not have herbs to treat him."

Whispersong remembered seeing a NightClan warrior coughing hard at the Gathering a few nights ago, and realized he must have had whitecough, and now it would spread.

"Please help us," Icepaw stepped forward, her blue-gray eyes full of pleading.

"We'll take you to Eveningstar," Twilightfoot meowed to the desperate NightClan cats.

Bushtail nodded, his thick tail lashing in urgentness.

Twilightfoot dipped his head. "Follow me," he ordered, then he turned to Whispersong and Cloverpaw. "Run ahead and tell Eveningstar that we're bringing three NightClan cats into our camp."

Whispersong nodded, then ran through the forest, Cloverpaw right behind her.

Once they reached the camp, Whispersong jogged over to Sparktail, who was walking out of the warriors' den, and asked, "Where's Eveningstar?"

Sparktail looked worried, then asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Whispersong assured her mother. "Twilightfoot just wants us to give him a message."

"Okay," Sparktail nodded, but she still looked wary. "He's in his den with Twigfoot and Rustypelt."

Cloverpaw meowed, "Thanks," then lead the way up to Eveningstar's den.

"Yes," Eveningstar was meowing. "I think that'll work." Then he turned his head as he saw Whispersong and Cloverpaw peering in. "Yes?" he asked, looking concerned.

"Twilightfoot is bringing NightClan cats into our camp," Whispersong meowed, dipping her head. "They were begging for herbs and asked us to bring them here."

Eveningstar was immediately on his paws. "Oh, StarClan. Rustypelt, Twigfoot, let's continue this conversation later. Thank you, you two."

Whispersong dipped her head, then she and Cloverpaw left the den, with Eveningstar, Twigfoot, and Rustypelt behind them. Soon enough, Twilightfoot, Copperleaf, and Meadowheart entered the camp, with Mapleleaf, Bushtail, and Icepaw right behind them.

Eveningstar padded forward. "Hello, I assume you have a good reason for coming into our territory, and to our camp?"

"Yes. Whitecough has broken out in NightClan, and we don't have enough herbs to treat it. We need to see Goldheart immediately. It's purely medicine cat business. We wouldn't intrude unless it was absolutely necessary," Bushtail meowed without hesitation, dipping his head.

Eveningstar dipped his head as well. "Of course. I shall let Goldheart deal with your needs then. Whispersong, take them to Goldheart's den. The rest of you, follow me; I want to talk to you about the patrol."

Whispersong nodded, and watched as Cloverpaw, Copperleaf, Twilightfoot, and Meadowheart followed Eveningstar over to the fresh-kill log, where little fresh-kill lay.

Whispersong turned and meowed, "This way," to the NightClan cats, and lead them across the clearing. She pushed past the ivy and into the stone den where Goldheart and Yellowpaw sat together, their heads bowed, and their voices full of concern. They looked up as they saw Whispersong with the NightClan cats.

"Bushtail?" Goldheart asked in surprise. "What in StarClan's name are you doing here? Is everything alright?"

"No," Bushtail shook his head fearfully. "Whitecough has broken out

in our camp. One of our warriors is very weak, and the elders show signs of sickness as well. And we don't have nearly enough herbs; the Twolegs killed all the catmint near the Twolegplace, and almost all of the coltsfoot and chickweed we had as backup was killed in the last frost."

Icepaw added desperately, "Half the Clan will die if we can't get herbs for our cats soon! If the sickness doesn't get to them first, starvation will surely contribute!"

Yellowpaw glanced sympathetically at Icepaw, then at her mentor.

Goldheart nodded. "We don't have much catmint, but we have chickweed and coltsfoot."

"Wait, chickweed?" asked Mapleleaf. "Coltsfoot? But don't we need catmint?"

"Coltsfoot his another remedy for whitecough, and chickweed can also be used to treat greencough," Goldheart explained.

Bushtail nodded. "Although they're not as strong, they'll work."

Yellowpaw was rummaging through the herbs, and Whispersong recognized the dried yellow flowers of the coltsfoot stem, and then a stem of somewhat dry green leaves with tiny white petals falling off of it. Whispersong guessed that it was chickweed. Yellowpaw carried the small stash of herbs over to her mentor, and dropped them at his paws. Whispersong assumed this was the chickweed and coltsfoot.

Goldheart stared at them. "Wow," he sighed. "That's not a lot."

"If you can't spare any, we... we understand," Bushtail began awkwardly.

"No, we can spare some. We will not let cats die if we can help it," Goldheart insisted, and Yellowpaw nodded at her mentor. The two medicine cats divided up each of the herbs and gave half to Bushtail, Icepaw, and Mapleleaf.

"Thank you so much," Icepaw meowed gratefully, racing over to lick

Yellowpaw's cheek.

Bushtail dipped his head. "NightClan will remember this, Goldheart. Thank you."

Goldheart flicked his tail. "Of course. We all take the oath to heal all cats equally when we're given our full medicine cat names, so why would that stop now?"

Bushtail nodded and turned to Icepaw. "Grab the chickweed," he meowed. Then he picked up the coltsfoot and dipped his head to the medicine cats once more, pushed past the vines, and left the den. Goldheart and Yellowpaw followed, Whispersong right behind them.

"Thank you so much, Eveningstar," Mapleleaf dipped his head to the DawnClan leader. "Beechstar will be so grateful."

Eveningstar nodded in return.

Goldheart dipped his head to the three NightClan warriors, then meowed. "May StarClan light your path."

"And may StarClan have mercy on us this leaf-bare, and heal all the cats who get sick," Bushtail added, shaking his head in despair, then he turned and lead his Clanmates back to their camp.

Whispersong shivered as her mind wandered, and not just because of the cold. If NightClan had whitecough, and the tom who was sick had been at the Gathering with cats from all the Clans, then whitecough would spread throughout the whole forest. It'd be in DawnClan soon, no doubt.

And the Clan, weakened from hunger, couldn't stand much of a chance.

Chapter 3

Whispersong opened her eyes as the waning moon shone through the trees. Tonight was the night she'd see Bumblefrost. But what would happen if Echoheart realized she'd snuck out to see him again? Whispersong shook her head. It wasn't an *if*, it was a *when*. She knew her sister would find out sooner or later that she was still sneaking away.

Whispersong sighed. But she *had* to see Bumblefrost. She couldn't just *not* go.

Whispersong glanced around the warriors' den. Every cat was asleep, but it'd be harder to sneak out when there were so many cats in the den. In the apprentices' den, there'd been only four other cats, besides herself. Whispersong held her breath, then carefully stepped around the sleeping warriors. She passed Sparrowtail, curled up beside Sunfur and Eaglefeather. Beside Eaglefeather's brown pelt was Meadowheart, her tortoiseshell and white fur contrasting against Eaglefeather's dark brown. Sparktail and Rustypelt were curled up behind them, and Whispersong froze as Rustypelt raised his head, but he laid it back down again, his snoring filling the den once more.

Once safely out of the den, Whispersong crept quietly across the moonlit clearing, dark gray clouds drifting across the moon every now and then, casting shadows on the DawnClan camp. Whispersong glanced at Moonshine and Prairiefoot, who were on guard and who had their backs turned to Whispersong, then she slowly walked behind the High-stone, and slipped through the gorse bushes that lined the the secret way out of camp Whisersong had discovered a few moons ago. She squeezed out of the patch of undergrowth, then cautiously climbed up the stone wall, careful not to dislodge loose pebbles. Once at the top, Whisersong raced through the forest, feeling the cold breeze tug at her fur. She narrowed her eyes as the chill swept by her, but continued onward.

Suddenly Whisersong picked up the scent of a bird, and she paused.

She saw it hopping along the roots of a large oak tree a few fox-lengths away, digging in the ground with its beak. She recognized it as a starling. Whispersong's stomach growled, but she knew that some cat would find out if she'd eaten before hunting for the rest of the Clan, and she be in trouble, especially since it was the middle of leaf-bare.

Then Whispersong had an idea. If she hunted it, and killed it, she could stay longer with Bumblefrost. She could return at dawn, then when every cat asked her where she'd been, she'd show them the starling and say that she'd been out hunting. They couldn't argue; the Clan desperately needed food right now.

Whispersong nodded to herself, then lowered to the cold ground and shifted into the hunting crouch. She slowly crept forward and stalked her prey, the wind blowing harder. Whispersong thanked StarClan that she was downwind. She stalked forward, the starling oblivious to the fact that she was there. Whispersong paused then rocked her haunches, preparing to spring. She launched herself at the bird, landing squarely on top of it. It let out a small cry, but before it could do any more, Whispersong was holding it to the ground, and its limp body did not stir again.

Whispersong quickly buried the starling by the roots of the oak tree, then continued on her way. She looked up at the sky; she could just barely see the pale white outline of the moon as it was hidden by the clouds. It was just past moonhigh.

Whispersong soon reached the thick patch of gorse and heather bushes where the entrance to hers and Bumblefrost's secret clearing was, and she squeezed through. Once inside, she barely had time to breathe before she was knocked over. Whispersong struggled beneath her attacker's weight, and she reached out with unsheathed claws to slash at the stranger, but it held her down firmly. She was now lying on her back, preparing for the agony that was sure to come.

When it didn't, she opened her eyes. Bumblefrost was standing over her, a wide smile spreading across his face.

"Bumblefrost!" she exclaimed in relief, her heart still pounding.

"Don't do that! You nearly scared me out of my fur!"

Bumblefrost let her up, then gave his chest fur a couple of quick licks. "A warrior needs to be ready for anything," he purred in amusement.

Whispersong reached out to cuff him over the ears. He ducked, then pushed her over.

"Stupid furball," she muttered playfully, getting to her paws.

Bumblefrost sniggered, eyes alight with laughter.

"Good news," Whispersong meowed, suddenly remembering her catch.

"What?"

"I can stay longer this time," she purred. "I caught a starling before I came here. It was good luck really, but now I can tell any cat who asks where I've been that I went hunting. They can't complain; it's leaf-bare. We need food."

"That's great!" Bumblefrost purred, his tail flicking in happiness. "I can try and hunt on my way back too. And if I don't catch anything, they can't be too suspicious; hunting's hard in the middle of leaf-bare."

Whispersong nodded. "So we'll stay here until just before dawn."

Bumblefrost nodded and purred. Then the smile faded away and anger filled his green eyes. "What ever happened to you and your sister after the Gathering?"

"Oh," Whispersong murmured. "Well, she asked me to explain and I told her that I didn't have to tell her anything. Then she got really angry, and I did too... Then she threatened to tell Eveningstar..." Whispersong sighed. "Then... well... I jumped on her and we sort of... fought, with claws."

Bumblefrost narrowed his eyes. His tail lashed. "What did she say after that?"

"She just left me, and told me I wasn't her sister anymore. Then when I woke up the day after the Gathering, she was outside talking with Goldheart about her cuts, and she..." Whispersong paused. "She stood up for me. She told him she'd slipped and I'd grabbed her shoulders with my claws to pull her up."

"And he believed that?"

"I think so. I couldn't see them. I was listening from inside the den."

"Oh." There was a long pause, then Bumblefrost murmured, "You know we're going to have to sort this out one day." He sighed. "Your sister knows; mine is suspicious. If either of them tell Rainstar or Eveningstar... well, we're crowfood."

Whispersong nodded. She always knew they would have to end up sorting out what they were going to do, but she'd never wanted to admit it to herself.

"We can't just go on meeting each other in secret for the rest of our lives," Bumblefrost sighed, shaking his head. He looked up at Whispersong. "Look, we're... best friends," he murmured. "I don't want to lose you; you're the only cat who understands me. But I don't want to lose my Clan or my family either. If our Clans find out, we'll both lose the trust of everyone we know and care about." He sighed heavily. "We need to sort it out soon. We both know things like this never end well... But I can't just stop seeing you! Like I said, you're the only cat who truly understands me."

"I know how you feel," she murmured, staring down at her paws. She knew they needed to sort this out, for the both of them and for their Clans' sake. But she cared too much for him, and, as she now was beginning to realize, as more than friends. She now knew what the flutter in her stomach was whenever their eyes met, the shivers that raced along her spine when their fur accidentally brushed. But she didn't know if he felt the same way.

I can't lose him! But I can't lose Echoheart either. She loved her sister dearly; she'd die for her! But Whispersong knew she'd have to choose one over the other one day. *That's the only way it'll ever work out. It can't be both of them.*

And Echoheart, along with the rest of her Clanmates, would probably be the path Whispersong would choose. She couldn't give up her entire Clan just to visit a friend from another Clan, even if she was beginning to see Bumblefrost as more than a friend.

"What do we do?" Bumblefrost whispered, jerking Whispersong from her thoughts.

She sighed. "I... I don't know," she replied quietly, staring at the rising moon above them with sadness.

By the time they had to head home, they had hardly moved. Whispersong was now lying beside Bumblefrost as he was crouched lazily next to her. The grief of knowing they'd have to say goodbye to each other soon, permanently, tugged at her heart.

Whispersong lifted her head and looked at him. "We've got to leave," she reminded him.

Bumblefrost nodded weakly. "Okay."

Whispersong touched her nose to his, and meowed, "Don't worry, we'll figure something out. I promise." *Even if it means saying goodbye.*

He looked away. "I know."

"When do we want to meet again?" she asked him.

"I... I think a half-moon would be best," he murmured, avoiding her eyes. "Our sisters are suspicious, and that will allow them time to think we're not sneaking out. By then, maybe we'll be ready to... sort it out."

Whispersong nodded sadly, pushing the thoughts of ever sorting anything out from her mind. She couldn't think about it. She just couldn't. She sighed. "I'll miss you."

Bumblefrost looked up at her again, his pale green eyes full of sadness. "Me too. Thank you for understanding."

Whispersong smiled sadly. Then they pulled apart and walked

through the scrub oak together, separating soon after that. Whispersong watched him go, his tan and black pelt soon disappearing behind the trees. Whispersong turned around; the sky was now bright yellow, and the sun would rise soon. She quickened her pace, remembering to grab her starling first. She dug up her prey, but before she continued on her way, she gave herself a quick and thorough wash, ridding her pelt of DayClan's scent, of Bumblefrost's scent.

She soon approached the bramble barrier and saw Echoheart, with Hailpaw, Prairiefoot, and Sparrowtail behind her.

"Come on," Prairiefoot was saying. "Let's get on with this dawn patrol."

Echoheart was nodding, then she looked up. When she saw Whispersong, her eyes narrowed, saying, *Where have you been?*

Whispersong swallowed, then lifted her chin a little higher; she wouldn't show her sister any signs that she'd snuck out again.

"Went hunting?" asked Sparrowtail. "Nice catch! Thank StarClan you had some luck!"

Whispersong nodded warmly at her friend. "The Clan needed some food," she meowed, directing her words right at Echoheart without meeting her sister's eyes. "I thought I'd go hunting."

"For the whole night?" Echoheart asked pointedly, narrowing her blue eyes. She waited for Whispersong to answer, wanting proof that she'd snuck out.

But Whispersong wouldn't give it to her. "I thought some prey might be out at night," she improvised. "Owls are, so I thought maybe other animals were." Then she added, "And I was right; I caught this starling."

Echoheart narrowed her eyes even more, looking disappointed as the other cats believed Whispersong's lie. Whispersong looked at Echoheart and blinked slowly and defiantly, daring Echoheart to question her. Echoheart slightly curled her lip, revealing her sharp

teeth. There was an unspoken threat in her sister's look: *Next time, I'll catch you*, it said.

Whispersong swallowed nervously, but walked right past her, pretending the mottled gray tabby pelt of her sister wasn't there. She quickly glanced over her shoulder and saw the dawn patrol leaving, Echoheart following. Whispersong sighed in relief.

She walked across the clearing, where Spruceclaw and Copperleaf were talking on the sunning-stones, sharing tongues. Raypaw was following Cloverpaw across the clearing, with Meadowheart right behind them. Creekfall and Aspenleaf were sharing a blackbird with Sunfur, while Whispersong heard loud mewls coming from the nursery, where Sagetail was probably taking care of Aspenleaf's kits at the moment.

Whispersong dropped the starling on the fresh-kill pile, where a small rabbit, tiny sparrow, a vole, and three mice lay. The Clan needed more food, and soon, especially with whitecough hanging in the air, waiting to strike.

"Nice catch, Whispersong!" exclaimed Aspenleaf. "That's a pretty good-sized starling!"

"Thanks," Whispersong smiled.

"Goldheart!" Whispersong turned around and saw Yellowpaw calling her mentor over by the elders' den.

Goldheart looked at his apprentice, worry filling his orange eyes.

Yellowpaw ran over to him, and meowed something urgently to him. Goldheart's eyes clouded, and together the two ran across the clearing and into the elders' den.

"What's going on?" Creekfall asked.

Sunfur shrugged. "I don't know, but I hope it's not bad."

Aspenleaf finished the last bite of her meal, then got to her paws, curiosity and worry in her green eyes.

Goldheart and Yellowpaw soon came out, with Ferrettail leaning against them. He was coughing violently, and his ribs showed clearly through his fur; he was getting worse! Having no food had weakened him, and now he was sick! Whispersong recognized that cough from the NightClan tom at the Gathering. Ferrettail had whitecough.

"Get the catmint!" Goldheart ordered Yellowpaw. "We need to treat him as fast as possible, before it can spread!" Yellowpaw ran ahead, and Goldheart soon followed, with Ferrettail limping beside him.

Whispersong felt horror creeping along her spine, and dread clawing at her stomach. It may have already spread! It had already spread from NightClan to DawnClan!

Who else had it?

Whispersong's stomach plummeted.

Do I have it?

Chapter 4

Echoheart woke up in the warriors' den and turned her head. Whispersong's nest was empty. She leapt to her paws and raced outside, but Whispersong was just sharing a meal with Sparrowtail and Cloverpaw. Relief flooded over Echoheart. Over the past few days, after Echoheart had seen her sister with the starling, Whispersong hadn't snuck out of camp. She *knew* Whispersong had met Bumblefrost again that night, that she actually hadn't been hunting all night. Her lie may have convinced the rest of the Clan, but it hadn't convinced Echoheart.

Echoheart stretched, then walked over to join Raypaw and Hailpaw, who were play-fighting by the sunning-stones. "What are you doing?" she asked the two apprentices.

"Waiting for Twigfoot and Prairiefoot to get back from the dawn patrol," Raypaw meowed, rolling over.

"They said they'd take us training at sunhigh," Hailpaw explained. Echoheart looked up; it was halfway to sunhigh.

"Don't you have apprentice duties you should do?" The question wasn't in scorn; Echoheart knew, from her own experiences, that apprentices couldn't eat or go training until they had finished their apprentice duties for the day.

"Goldheart ordered us not to do them," Raypaw answered.

"He said he didn't want us near the elders, because then we might catch whitecough," Hailpaw frowned. "Or spread it to the rest of the

Clan, and we don't want to be near the nursery either, and risk spreading it to the queens and kits."

Echoheart nodded solemnly. She was reminded yet again that Ferrettail had come down with whitecough a few days ago, and Spruceclaw had shown signs that he was getting sick too. Echoheart sighed. She hoped that Goldheart had enough herbs, and she prayed to StarClan that no cats would die from sickness this season.

Just then, Eveningstar leapt down from the High-stone with Twilightfoot, Rustypelt, and Sunfur behind him. He spoke in an urgent whisper, then left the three senior warriors, jumping back up onto the boulder. "Cats of DawnClan, let all those old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the High-stone for a Clan meeting!" he yowled. He waited for most of the Clan to gather quickly beneath the High-stone, then continued. "We need more hunting patrols! With whitecough spreading faster than the wind across the moor, we need food to keep up our strength!" He stepped back as Goldheart leapt up onto the High-stone beside him.

"We need to stop this sickness before it can turn to greencough, or spread to every single cat in the forest. A good way to prevent getting whitecough," Goldheart yowled, "is to keep up your strength, and prey can do that." He paused, then raised his voice. "Another thing: stay away from the queen, kits, and elders. They are the most prone to these illnesses, and are the most affected." Every cat nodded.

"Good," Eveningstar meowed. "Now, we need to pause training for the apprentices; we need them for hunting right now." Echoheart saw Raypaw, Hailpaw, and Cloverpaw exchange sad glances, but then nod in understanding at Eveningstar. "I want Rustypelt, Twilightfoot, and Sunfur to each lead a hunting patrol; take three other cats with you," he ordered the three older warriors, who nodded.

When the meeting broke up, Rustypelt padded over to Echoheart. "Would you like to join my hunting patrol?" he asked.

"Sure," Echoheart nodded. "Who else is coming with us?"

"Sparktail and Hailpaw."

Soon the two joined them; and the four were off, heading out toward the NightClan border. Echoheart walked beside Hailpaw, their pawsteps drumming against the cold forest floor. "Bet you I catch more than you," Hailpaw teased, his bright blue eyes twinkling with mischief.

"Bet you don't!" Echoheart purred back.

"Come on, you two," Sparktail meowed, sounding somber. Echoheart stopped joking around; this *was* serious. The Clan needed food and strength to prevent the spread of this deadly sickness, and Echoheart couldn't afford to joke around while her Clanmates needed prey.

The sun now reached sunhigh, and the four stopped in a clearing full of small birch, oak, and aspen saplings, light brown grass surrounding them. Echoheart gave Hailpaw a challenging glance, and the two separated, trying to catch more prey that the other.

Echoheart soon found the scent-trail of vole, and she followed it. It was scuffling along a patch of tall grass and weeds, washing its tiny little face in a puddle of water. Echoheart rocked her haunches, then pounced. She killed it swiftly, then buried it proudly by a patch of ferns.

Unfortunately, Echoheart didn't have any more luck; she missed a small chickadee, and didn't find anything after that. Echoheart dug up her vole, then headed back to the clearing, where Sparktail and Rustypelt were sitting. It was nearly dusk, and they needed to get back.

"Where's Hailpaw?" Echoheart asked.

"I don't know," Sparktail meowed. "I haven't been here that long, so we should give him some time."

"Okay," Echoheart agreed. "Any luck?" she asked her parents.

"I caught a mouse," Rustypelt meowed.

"And I have a raven," Sparktail murmured.

"A raven!" Echoheart exclaimed. "That will feed all of the elders and queens! They'll have full bellies!" Echoheart purred. At least the most vulnerable cats in the Clan would have food and, hopefully, wouldn't get sick.

"Yes," Sparktail purred back. "What about you?"

"Just this small vole," she meowed, prodding it with her paw.

"Well, it's better than nothing," Rustypelt pointed out.

"That's true," Echoheart nodded.

Just then, the bracken on Echoheart's left rustled, and Hailpaw came bursting through, a magpie in his jaws.

"Wow! I think you win," she meowed, staring at the large bird he was carrying.

Hailpaw smiled, then he dropped it. "Is that it?"

"Yes," Rustypelt meowed. "Let's get back to camp."

The four headed through the forest once again, Echoheart carrying her vole, Hailpaw carrying his magpie, Sparktail carrying her raven, and Rustypelt carrying his mouse. When they carefully made their way across the stream, which was no longer frozen, and passed the Great Pine, they met up with Sunfur's patrol. Sparrowtail, who was on her patrol, ran over to Echoheart and meowed, "Nice catch."

"Thanks," Echoheart smiled. "Did you catch anything?"

Sparrowtail shook her head, looking distant in her reply. Echoheart could tell there was something on her mind, something bothering her. There was a pause, then Sparrowtail murmured, "Uhh," and slowed her pace so she and Echoheart were at the back of the patrols. "I noticed that you and Whispersong are, um... well, not talking. I-Is there something I can do to help?"

Echoheart looked into Sparrowtail's deep brown eyes, and she knew

that she wanted to help, wanted her two friends to be happy. But Echoheart wouldn't give her sister away, no matter how mad she was at her. Echoheart shook her head. "I don't know. I just hope it'll sort out itself." Echoheart prayed her words were true.

By the time the patrols got back, the fresh-kill pile had grown. It wasn't big, but it wasn't empty either. Echoheart picked up a kestrel from the pile and carried it to the entrance of the nursery. Then, remembering what Eveningstar said about not going near the kits, Echoheart stopped near the entrance and called, "Aspenleaf? Sagetail?"

Echoheart herd tiny mewls of protest, and saw Pinekit following Aspenleaf toward the entrance to the nursery. "No," Aspenleaf scolded the brown tom-kit. Echoheart knew that the cream-furred queen was strict about letting her kits outside, especially with the cold and sickness. "You need to stay inside. Go find Needlekit." Soon Aspenleaf appeared at the entrance, blinking away the brightness. "Hello, Echoheart," she meowed.

"This is for you and Sagetail to share," Echoheart told her, giving the kestrel to her.

"Thank you," Aspenleaf purred, taking the prey in her jaws.

"Your kits are moving well now," Echoheart commented, hearing mewling coming from inside the heather bush; Aspenleaf's four kits were playing loudly inside.

"Yes," Aspenleaf sighed. "And they're learning how to cause trouble too."

Echoheart twitched her whiskers in amusement. "Which one's the most trouble?"

"Oh, definitely Pinekit," Aspenleaf smiled weakly.

Echoheart nodded. "They're all getting stronger."

"Tulipkit is the smallest," Aspenleaf meowed, her voice lowering. "She's always shivering and never wants to play. I'm worried about her."

"I'm sure she'll be fine. She's strong, just like her parents," Echoheart encouraged her. Then seeing Aspenleaf's continually saddening face, Echoheart meowed, "Well, you'd better take this kestrel inside. Enjoy your meal," and then left her in peace.

"Thanks," Aspenleaf replied absently, turning around to head back into the nursery. Echoheart heard mewls of excitement as Aspenleaf walked back in. "Shh," the queen murmured.

Echoheart stood there for a moment longer, then walked back across the clearing. The setting sun cast shadows across the clearing, and the sky twinkled with the first star.

Echoheart curled up on her moss nest. Soon her eyes closed, and she was asleep.

* * *

Over the next half-moon, hunting got a little better, but the whitecough in the camp did not. Ferrettail was worse, and Copperleaf now had it. Somehow, and unfortunately, Tulipkit and Aspenleaf had caught it too. Goldheart had moved them into the medicine cats den with Ferrettail and Copperleaf, while he gave borage to Sagetail so she could feed Needlekit, Rosekit, and Pinekit the little supply of milk she had in Aspenleaf's absence.

Above all this, Echoheart found out that Whispersong had snuck out again, but frustratingly, she'd come back with prey again. Echoheart had wondered, *How can she sneak away, with a* DayClan *cat, while her Clan is sick and hungry?* Echoheart knew what her answer would be: *I was hunting! How can you complain about me bringing back prey?*

Echoheart sighed. And if Whispersong didn't say that, she'd for sure yell at Echoheart again that it wasn't *her* business.

But it *was*. If it affected DawnClan, in any way, it was definitely Echoheart's business. And of course it affected DawnClan! It divided Whispersong's loyalties between her Clan and that DayClan cat. Echoheart knew if they one day met in battle, her sister would be completely torn, and Echoheart didn't want that for her sister, and

she didn't she want divided loyalties in DawnClan either.

Echoheart sighed and tore her attention away from Whispersong.

Yellowpaw and Goldheart were talking about the Moonfall, and about a dream they had had there a few nights ago. Eveningstar was listening to them, and Echoheart could hear them; they weren't trying very hard to talk quietly amongst themselves, so Echoheart guessed that they didn't care if any cat overheard it, which meant it affected the Clan urgently.

"...met up with a few StarClan cats," Yellowpaw was explaining. "And Goldheart and I recognized Fogtail and Whirlheart among them."

At those names Ferrettail peered out from the medicine cats den weakly. "Fogtail? Whirlheart?" he rasped, voice dull but eyes bright.

"Shh," Goldheart turned around. "Go rest. I'll tell you about it when I'm done."

Ferrettail agreed grudgingly and slowly retreated back into the den.

Yellowpaw continued. "They told us: 'Beware of the invisible enemy, poised to attack.'" The medicine cat apprentice shivered.

"Well," Eveningstar meowed, sitting in thought. "What does it mean?"

"I think it's obvious, don't you think?" Goldheart shuddered. "It means whitecough."

Echoheart widened her eyes. If *StarClan* had to warn them about whitecough, then danger was surely on its way. Echoheart's stomach squirmed with fear.

"Well, in that case," Eveningstar muttered. "We need to keep all the cats away from the sick ones, except you two. If any of you starts feeling sick, stay away from other cats."

Goldheart nodded. "Yes, that's a good idea."

"Ohh," Yellowpaw cried out. "StarClan, let every cat get better!"

Goldheart nodded solemnly, and the two medicine cats turned and disappeared behind the vines of their den.

Echoheart shook her head in sadness, then went to talk to her former mentor, Bronzepelt, who, she saw, had overheard the medicine cats as well. "What can we do to help?" she asked him. "Cats might die."

Bronzepelt shook his head sadly. "I know. But the best we can do is stay away from the sick cats, and leave the medicine cats to treating it."

Echoheart nodded slowly, though she wished she could do something more, something to help her suffering Clanmates. She closed her eyes, praying that all the sick cats would pull through.

* * *

A scream woke Echoheart in the middle of that night. She was instantly on her paws, as were the rest of the warriors in the den. She ran out, racing toward the high-pitched shrieking. Echoheart skidded to a halt when she realized the screaming had come from the medicine cats den. Goldheart walked out of the den carrying an orange scrap in his jaws. His eyes were staring at his paws and his tail was dragging.

"No!" shrieked a voice inside the den. It was Aspenleaf. "Don't take her from me! StarClan, how could you?" The desperate yell was ended by a loud wail, filled with sobbing.

Echoheart then realized with horror that the limp orange scrap was Tulipkit. Creekfall realized it in the same heartbeat, and raced forward, pushing past Goldheart and into the den. He ignored the order from Goldheart not to go in, shrieking that he'd go in if he liked. "I don't care if I die; I *will* see my mate!"

Echoheart watched them numbly, barely aware of the rest of the Clan gathering around her. She bowed her head, Aspenleaf's wails filling the air and chilling the night. The stars shone coldly above,

and Echoheart silently cursed the spirits of her warrior ancestors. *Why her? Why an innocent little kit?* she silently growled up at them.

Goldheart set Tulipkit down, and bowed his head over her, nosing her nursery-soft orange fur gently. Creekfall helped Aspenleaf out of the den, and she leaned her head against her mate's shoulder as they closed their eyes in grief for their dead daughter.

"StarClan," Goldheart began, ears flattened. "Please take care of Tulipkit, and, though you took her life from her, she had a destiny. May she find it in your ranks." He licked the kit's mangled body, then looked up at the sky. "And please, have mercy on us. We pray you take no more cats this season; that is all we ask of you." Every cat bowed their heads further.

"Go... go safely, my sweetheart," Aspenleaf choked. Creekfall pressed closer to his mate, his eyes squeezed shut and tears dripped off his cheeks. All the while Tulipkit lay limp, her legs mangled, and her glassy eyes, staring off in the distance at something that wasn't there, would never be able to see the warm faces of her Clanmates again.

The next morning, Creekfall, Spruceclaw, and Twilightfoot buried Tulipkit just outside the camp. Creekfall stared off in the distance the rest of the day, oblivious to every cat around him, except for Aspenleaf. He wouldn't leave the medicine cats den, even after Goldheart and Eveningstar ordered him to, fearful of losing Aspenleaf as well. Their three remaining kits, frequently crying out for their mother, had no idea that their sister had died; no idea they'd never see her again; no idea that she now lived among StarClan. Aspenleaf told Creekfall to see their kits, to visit them, but he refused to leave the medicine cats den. Goldheart said it was best for him not to go into the nursery now, in case he infected the kits.

Echoheart now sat numbly beside Hailpaw, watching Goldheart and Yellowpaw bustle about the camp. "Yellowpaw," Goldheart meowed solemnly. "Could you go get me some more coltsfoot and catmint?"

Yellowpaw nodded sadly, and raced to the medicine cats den, returning with the herbs in her jaws. Goldheart was treating Cloverpaw, who'd complained of a runny nose and too much

coughing. Echoheart knew it was the early stages of whitecough.

Luckily, Copperleaf was slowly recovering and wasn't coughing anymore. Ferrettail, however, still had the disease, and was neither getting better nor worse.

"Save the herbs for another cat who needs it more," Ferrettail had rasped, but Goldheart had refused to give up on him.

One day Eveningstar came to check on Ferrettail, Cloverpaw, Aspenleaf, and Creekfall, and Goldheart had told him that unfortunately he'd caught the disease as well. Eveningstar wasn't fazed; he wanted to stay with the sick cats.

"I'm their leader," Eveningstar had said. "I won't abandon them."

Echoheart watched in sadness, wishing she could help. She felt the guilt tighten in her stomach as she watched her Clanmates suffer around her. Tulipkit was gone; how many more would follow?

* * *

Over the next half-moon, cats from each of the Clans had died, as announced at the Gathering, which Echoheart hadn't gone to: an elder and an apprentice from DuskClan, an elder from DayClan, two elders and one of Brownear's kits from NightClan, and Tulipkit from DawnClan. The medicine cats all worked together to treat the illness, which, Goldheart reported, was turning to greencough. Yellowpaw had said that Icepaw had saved the life of Brownear's two remaining kits, so she'd gotten her full medicine cat name in honor of it: Icedapple. Yellowpaw said she wanted to be like Icedapple, and wanted to protect Aspenleaf's three remaining kits. "I will *not* let them die," Yellowpaw promised, which comforted Aspenleaf.

Echoheart now sat with Yellowpaw outside the medicine cats den after a long day of hunting. Whispersong was beside them; in the crisis of the developing greencough over the last moon, Echoheart and Whispersong had resolved their argument, and Echoheart had forgotten about Whispersong's meetings with Bumblefrost.

"Eveningstar is really sick," Yellowpaw sighed. "He refuses to take herbs until he's sure that the other cats have been treated."

"What about Cloverpaw, Aspenleaf, Creekfall, and Ferrettail?" Whispersong murmured.

"Cloverpaw didn't get the full sickness, thank StarClan." Yellowpaw closed her eyes, looking relieved beyond words. "She was treated early. And Aspenleaf and Creekfall are through the sickness. They still *look* like they're sick, but it's just the after-effects," she meowed, sighing. "So now Aspenleaf is in the nursery with Rosekit, Needlekit, and Pinekit again."

"That's good," Echoheart murmured. "Do the kits know... that Tulipkit...?"

Yellowpaw shook her head. "I don't think so. I don't think they'll remember her, which is good, so they don't feel any grief. Young kits should never feel pain as bad as that."

There was a silence, then Whispersong spoke. "And Ferrettail?"

Yellowpaw bowed her head. "He's getting worse. He's got greencough."

"How do you not have greencough then? You're around the sick cats all the time!" Echoheart asked Yellowpaw.

Yellowpaw shook her head. "We sleep outside the den, under the gorse bush beside it." Yellowpaw paused. "But Goldheart did get sick a quarter-moon ago. He realized he had the symptoms early, and treated it before it got worse. I thank StarClan that I haven't gotten sick."

"Me too," Echoheart sighed in relief. She'd have thought she'd have it by now, especially with how thin she was getting with the scarce prey.

Just then, Goldheart ran out of the den. "Ferrettail's worse; much, much worse!"

Yellowpaw widened her eyes, then raced beside her mentor into the

medicine cats den. Echoheart exchanged a glance with Whispersong, then they raced after the medicine cats.

"Ferrettail!" Goldheart lashed his tail in urgency. His eyes filled with fear and he whipped around to Yellowpaw, who was looking for herbs. "He's even worse than when I left him heartbeats ago!" Goldheart exclaimed in terror. He turned back to the brown elder. "Ferrettail! You need to look at me, Ferrettail!"

"I-I'm okay," he rasped, green eyes dull with sickness.

"No you're not!" Yellowpaw cried out, racing across the den to gather more herbs.

"Don't waste your herbs on me. I... I am not afraid of joining StarClan," Ferrettail sighed, his flanks heaving with the effort of breath. He coughed, spitting up herbs he'd eaten earlier. Then he opened his eyes and stared off in the distance. "Fogtail?" He paused, breathing unsteady. "I'm ready..." he rasped. "Whirlheart? Quailkit? I'm... I'm coming."

"Ferrettail, no!" Echoheart gasped. "Hold on!" She twisted her head around. "Help him!" she exclaimed to Goldheart and Yellowpaw. Whispersong shuddered, looking horrified.

"There's nothing we can do," sighed Goldheart, and Yellowpaw bowed her head, mouth still full of herbs. "He's in the paws of StarClan." Yellowpaw dropped the herbs, a tear falling along with them. Echoheart watched her, feeling her helplessness like a claw in her heart. *She must feel awful knowing the Clan was relying on her as a medicine cat to heal her Clanmates, but she couldn't do it.* Another tear splashed on the stone floor of the den, and Goldheart leaned against Yellowpaw, staring down at the dying elder. Agony shone in his orange eyes.

"Do not grieve for me," Ferrettail meowed weakly. "I'll be in a happier place."

"But you can be happy here!" Yellowpaw choked.

"I know," Ferrettail meowed sadly. "But my time in DawnClan is

done. It's time I joined StarClan." He coughed again. "Tell Spruceclaw... tell... S-Spruceclaw... t-t-to... not grieve..." he trailed off. He let out one last breath, then lay limp. Soon a glassiness appeared over his green eyes, and they stared unseeingly at the den wall. The fur on his body lie still, and his ribs showed through his dark brown pelt. He was still, his flanks not rising and falling with breath like they used to. Ferrettail was dead; gone. Gone forever from the world.

Echoheart closed her eyes, bowing her head in grief. Another cat taken by the sickness. Another cat lost from their Clan. The cats grieved under the cold black veil that was the sky, while the thousand stars watched coldly from above.

Chapter 5

Whispersong lay on her nest, wide awake.

Ferrettail had been buried yesterday. Spruceclaw had been devastated, absolutely shocked beyond words when he saw his friend's dead body. Eveningstar still had the disease, and stayed in his den all day to prevent any other cat from getting it. Other than their leader, every cat was healing.

Whispersong wondered how the other Clans were doing with the spreading sickness. Was every Clan losing as much cats as DawnClan seemed to be losing? Whispersong sighed. If DawnClan was suffering, NightClan must have it worse, because of DayClan taking their prey for the past four moons.

At the thought of DayClan, Whispersong shuddered, not in fear, but worry for one cat in it. Did Bumblefrost have whitecough, or even greencough? Whispersong let out a ragged breath. Last time she'd seen Bumblefrost, which was at the Gathering a quarter-moon ago, he'd seemed fine, but she couldn't be sure now, especially since the sickness seemed to be worsening in all the Clans. Whispersong had told Bumblefrost then that she couldn't visit him for awhile, because her Clan was really sick. Bumblefrost had agreed, saying some of his Clan was sick as well. She'd told him she promised to try and come to the next Gathering so they could plan on their meeting times again. She missed Bumblefrost desperately, but at least Echoheart was no longer suspicious.

Whispersong rolled over and found Echoheart staring at her.

"Can't sleep?" Echoheart whispered.

"No, of course not," sighed Whispersong.

"Let's take a walk, to get our mind off things," Echoheart suggested, and Whispersong nodded, getting to her paws and following her sister out of the warriors' den.

Together the two sisters padded out of camp, walking side by side. There was no more snow, and now small buds appeared on every bush and tree. Little blades of grass were poking out of the dirt, bright green and full of dew each morning. New-leaf was just around the corner; Whispersong could almost taste it, but first they'd have to get through the whitecough.

"What's on your mind?" Echoheart asked after they passed the Great Pine, stopping and sitting down near the bank of the stream.

Whispersong sat next to her. "I'm just worried about the greencough. Who knows when it'll be over?" Whispersong sighed, knowing that it wasn't a lie; she *was* worried about the sickness. But what was really keeping her up was Bumblefrost.

"I know," Echoheart nodded sadly, voice faltering. "Although, according to Goldheart, every cat but Eveningstar is cured."

"Yes, but what if Eveningstar infects some other cat?" Whispersong meowed quietly.

"We can only hope to StarClan that that doesn't happen," Echoheart sighed, breath billowing out in a cold fog.

Whispersong stared up at the stars, and a silence engulfed the two she-cats.

Finally Echoheart spoke up. "So, um..." she began, looking uncomfortable. "I-I know it's not my business... but... about you and Bumblefrost..."

Whispersong felt a burst of irritation. "You're right," she retorted. "It *isn't* your business." Then she paused. "Sorry," she meowed guiltily.

"I just worry for you," Echoheart murmured, blinking slowly. "If you two meet in battle one day, your heart will be torn. I don't want you to be in that situation. It'd be horrible." Echoheart looked down at her paws.

Whispersong sighed and didn't meet her sister's eyes. "I know, and I'm glad you're concerned about me. But, I... I think I *love* him, Echoheart."

Echoheart let out an annoyed sniff.

Whispersong ignored it. "And I think he feels the same way, though he's never said it. He *understands* me. And I understand him. I can hardly stand to be away from him for more than a half-moon. I feel empty inside when I'm without him." She looked at Echoheart, whose blue eyes were narrowed in exasperation. "I don't suppose you'd know what that's like."

"I do," Echoheart meowed quietly, as if she didn't want to admit it. "When Hailpaw washed away down the stream, I thought he'd *died*. I felt like my heart had washed away with him." She looked at her paws.

Whispersong pressed closer to her sister. She knew Hailpaw had always liked Echoheart, ever since they were kits. But know Echoheart cared for him too. "You should tell him," she pressed her sister.

"Tell him what?" Echoheart asked warily.

"How you feel."

"What?"

Whispersong rolled her eyes in amusement. "How you feel about him, Echoheart. Every cat can see you two like each other. How can *you* not?"

Echoheart stared in confusion at the river in the distance. "I always did feel *something* when I was near him, and I knew he felt the same, but I never could pinpoint *what* it was."

"Stupid furball," Whispersong teased her sister.

"I-I'm just not sure I want any cat to know just yet..." Echoheart trailed off, twitching her ears in embarrassment.

"You don't have to," Whispersong murmured, stifling a purr of amusement.

Echoheart nodded, staring off in the distance, as if thinking about an old memory. Whispersong smiled and looked up at the moon, bright against through dark sky.

"So about you and Bumblefrost..." Echoheart asked again after a moment. "What will you do?"

"Right now, I don't know," Whispersong sighed. "But I *can't* leave him."

"I guess you won't," Echoheart growled, turning away.

"Just promise me you won't tell any cat?" Whispersong asked her sister pleadingly.

"I won't," Echoheart muttered, still not meeting Whispersong's gaze. "But that doesn't mean I like it."

"I know." Whispersong pressed her flank to her sister's, relieved. "Thank you. And don't worry; Bumblefrost and I *will* sort it out. We've realized that we can't meet each other in secret like this. We know we'll have to sort it out." *Even if it does mean saying goodbye forever.* Whispersong's heart throbbed at the thought.

They sat in silence for several heartbeats. Then, quite suddenly, Echoheart cuffed Whispersong's ears playfully. "I'll be here for you if you need me, you know. We're sisters," Echoheart murmured. "And we'll be tied together, not just because of the prophecy, but because we will always care for each other." Echoheart turned to look at Whispersong with a meaningful look in her blue eyes. "I'd die for you if it came to it."

"Me too," Whispersong murmured. She knew it was true. She'd die a thousand times over for her sister.

Then a thought filled her mind. She'd die for Bumblefrost too, wouldn't she? She cared about him, cared deeply about him. A horrible thought tugged at her heart. If they were both a moment away from death, and only one could be saved, who would she

choose? She quickly pushed the thought away; she loved them *both*. She couldn't bear to choose between them. But she knew that eventually she'd have to.

Her heart was slowly being torn in two, like Echoheart had warned her: one half with Echoheart and one half with Bumblefrost.

But which half would she eventually choose?

* * *

"Whispersong!" Echoheart meowed. "Eveningstar has called a Clan meeting!"

Whispersong blinked open her eyes. The sunlight was just barely slipping through the trees and into the camp; it was a bit early for a Clan meeting, she noticed, but she followed her sister wearily into the clearing anyways, stumbling as she walked.

Whispersong noticed Hailpaw and Cloverpaw prancing beside their parents over by the fresh-kill log. Twigfoot looked amused while Moonshine watched on proudly, and Yellowpaw laughed as her brother and sister boasted around the three of them.

"Are they having their warrior's ceremonies?" Whispersong asked her sister in surprise.

"Maybe!" Echoheart blinked in thought. "They have been training for a while now."

"When were their assessments?"

"A few sunrises ago. You must have been out hunting."

"Oh." Whispersong did remember coming back from hunting one day and seeing Prairiefoot, Meadowheart, Hailpaw, and Cloverpaw returning from the forest carrying prey and looking happy; that must have been when their assessment was.

Whispersong stared across the camp at Cloverpaw and Hailpaw, who were bouncing together beside Twigfoot and Moonshine. Raypaw sat on the other side of Twigfoot, looking sadly at

Cloverpaw and Hailpaw.

"I'll be all alone!" Raypaw wailed.

"Shush," Bronzepelt muttered, walking up to his son. "That's not how a warrior handles things." Raypaw immediately sat taller and stopped talking.

"Hailpaw, Cloverpaw," Eveningstar yowled, looking all clear of the sickness, which caught Whispersong by surprise. Hadn't Yellowpaw said only yesterday that he had greencough?

Whispersong leaned closer to Yellowpaw, who she'd ended up sitting next to. "Why does Eveningstar look better all of a sudden? Just yesterday he looked completely sick."

"He lost a life," Yellowpaw whispered back sadly, and Whispersong widened her eyes in shock. He'd lost a life? How many did he have left? Fear gripped Whispersong's body, but before she could ponder it much longer, Eveningstar addressed Hailpaw and Cloverpaw, and Whispersong put her thoughts on the ceremony.

"Hailpaw, Cloverpaw, it's time you were made warriors. Our Clan needs your strength after this hardship and the terrible losses we've suffered." Every cat in the clearing bowed their heads, remembering Tulipkit's and Ferrettail's deaths. Hailpaw and Cloverpaw dipped their heads, ready to serve DawnClan when they were most needed. They leapt up on the High-stone at Eveningstar's call, sitting beside each other proudly.

"Prairiefoot, Meadowheart," Eveningstar now addressed the two warriors in the front row. "Are you satisfied with these apprentices' training?"

"Completely," Prairiefoot meowed.

"Yes; they deserve it," Meadowheart replied wholeheartedly.

Eveningstar then looked up at the lightening sky, the last few stars slowly fading. "I, Eveningstar, leader of DawnClan, ask my warrior ancestors to look down on these two apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend

them to you as warriors in their turn." He paused, turning to Cloverpaw. "Cloverpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Cloverpaw puffed out her chest, her green eyes blazing with determination. "I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. From this moment on, you will be known as Clovertail. StarClan honors your dedication and caring personality, and we welcome you as a full warrior of DawnClan."

"Clovertail!" Whispersong cheered, the rest of the Clan joining in.

When the chanting died down, Eveningstar turned to Hailpaw. "Hailpaw," he meowed. "Do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Hailpaw answered immediately, his blue eyes bright with confidence and pride.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. From this moment you shall be called Hailstorm. StarClan honors your determination and perseverance, and we welcome you as a full warrior of DawnClan."

"Hailstorm!" Echoheart led the call, and soon Whispersong and the rest of the Clan joined in.

The two new warriors, eyes filled with awe and amazement, jumped down from the High-stone, where the Clan surrounded them in welcoming. Echoheart ran up to Hailstorm and licked his nose. Hailstorm looked surprised at Echoheart, but took it with a smile, and nosed her fur. Echoheart touched her nose to his, then looked away in embarrassment. Hailstorm smiled, his blue eyes full of warmth.

Whispersong let out a purr of happiness for her sister. *About time*, she thought. Echoheart had found that her heart lay with Hailstorm at last.

Whispersong felt her mind wandering to Bumblefrost yet again. If only he were in DawnClan! Their relationship wouldn't be forbidden then.

Whispersong sighed. How was she ever going to sort this out?

* * *

Whispersong trotted through the forest, with Echoheart, Hailstorm, and Clovertail right behind her. A moon had passed since Hailstorm and Clovertail had been made warriors. The dark time of leaf-bare had finally gone. Although Ferrettail and Tulipkit had been lost, life went on as it always did during dark times, and Sagetail's kits had finally been born: two healthy she-kits. Aspenleaf's kits had started running around and play-fighting, talking up a storm once they'd learned to.

Copperleaf had officially joined the elders, and now slept with Spruceclaw underneath the low-hanging branches of the elders' den. Just as new-leaf had approached, he'd suggested it, knowing he wouldn't have enough energy to fight and hunt for DawnClan in the upcoming seasons like he'd used to.

Whispersong took a deep breath. The forest was now full of green buds, small flowers, and dewdrops. The sun shone warmly through the branches of the trees above their heads, warming Whispersong's cold pelt. The birds sang in the trees, and butterflies and dragonflies flew by their heads, while bees buzzed around the grass, searching for nectar and pollen.

Hailstorm walked side by side with Echoheart, the mottled dark gray pelt of Echoheart brushing the black- and white-patched pelt of Hailstorm. Clovertail ran ahead, her tail high in happiness as the sunlight glimmered off of her black fur.

Whispersong breathed in the sweet scent of the new growth, the grass and flowers brushing her legs as she trotted after her friends. She soon heard the stream gurgling in the distance, sounding louder now that the weather had warmed with the arrival of new-leaf. When they came to the bank of the rushing water, Whispersong noticed that its level had risen up to the edge of the bank, the

snowmelt from the mountains washing into it. Whispersong bent down and lapped up some of the crystal clear water; it was cold and refreshing on her tongue, and made her heart fill up with happiness, the joy that new-leaf was here filling her whole body.

"I smell mouse!" exclaimed Clovertail to Whispersong's left.

"And blue jays!" Hailstorm purred, sitting in the soft grass beside his sister.

"Ooh, and rabbits!" Echoheart smiled.

"The prey is running well again!" Whispersong exclaimed, her silver striped tail curling up in happiness.

"DawnClan will eat well!" Clovertail purred.

"We should hunt in pairs," Whispersong suggested. "Sunfur told us to bring back as much prey as possible, and by splitting up we'll cover more ground."

"Alright," Clovertail nodded, her black tail swishing in eagerness.

"I'll hunt with Echoheart," Hailstorm meowed immediately, and Echoheart blinked happily at him, both of their blue eyes as bright as the sky above them.

Whispersong saw Clovertail roll her eyes in amusement. "I'll hunt with you then, Whispersong."

"Alright," Whispersong laughed. "We'll head toward the meadow."

"And we'll head into the forest," Hailstorm purred, nudging Echoheart playfully.

Once they'd decided their routes, the four split up into their pairs. Clovertail trotted just beside Whispersong, her paws bouncing on the green grass, glowing in the new-leaf sunlight. The many trees above, full with leaves again, dappled the forest with spots of sunlight. Whispersong listened to the birds singing and chirping in the trees, while the bees buzzed by her ears. The raspberry and blackberry bushes were blooming, and the gorse and heather bushes

filled the forest with sweet scents, making Whispersong trot through the forest happily.

Whispersong stepped into the meadow, and her eyes widened.

"Wow!" Clovertail exclaimed.

The meadow was now bright green with grass, and wildflowers dotted the field's new growth. Whispersong stepped out into the sunlight, the soft grass cushioning her pawsteps. Grasshoppers and butterflies flew out of the thin blades wherever she took a step, and the warm breeze blew across the moor, ruffling her fur, and causing the grass to wave across the meadow. The trees' new leaves rustled behind her, singing the happy song of new-leaf. Whispersong took a deep breath, sweet scents filling her nose once more. Fluffy white clouds drifted through the warm, blue sky, blowing carelessly over the forest. The sun shone above her head, the warmth of it spreading happiness throughout her.

"Let's hunt now," Clovertail meowed. "I can smell rabbit so strong here that I can almost taste it!"

Whispersong purred in amusement, then followed her friend toward the river, where new reeds and lilies had sprung up on the banks. Whispersong scented rabbit, like Clovertail had pointed out, and crouched down, stalking towards it, while Clovertail headed in a different direction. Whispersong licked her lips as she saw the brown and white fur of the rabbit just ahead, nibbling on a patch of clovers. Whispersong rocked her haunches, then pounced. It ran, but Whispersong got to it first. Soon she was burying it beside a small gorse bush, the bush's bright yellow flowers ensuring that Whispersong would find her precious prey later.

By the time she and Clovertail had met up, Whispersong had caught the rabbit and a vole. Clovertail had found three starlings, and Whispersong laughed as she saw her trying to carry all three.

"What?" Clovertail asked, dropping the birds on the ground. She spat out their black and white feathers, then retorted playfully, "I'd like to see you carrying a *rabbit* and your vole."

Whispersong purred in amusement. "I know," she laughed. Then she looked up at the sky, the sun slowly sinking back towards the horizon. "Let's find Hailstorm and Echoheart."

Clovertail nodded, and together they grabbed their prey and trotted through the forest, soon sitting in the clearing where they'd first split up.

"Hello!" meowed a cheerful voice behind them. Whispersong turned around and saw Echoheart and Hailstorm padding through the long grass and toward them. "Good hunting?" Hailstorm asked.

"Yeah," Clovertail purred. "You?"

Echoheart meowed excitedly, "We caught a duck!"

"Really? A duck?" Whispersong asked.

"Yep," Hailstorm nodded proudly. "We stalked it from either side, then caught it together."

"Good thing they don't have talons or claws," Echoheart sighed. "Their feet are flatter than a leaf!"

Whispersong laughed.

"Where is it?" Clovertail asked, looking around.

"Oh, we left it by the stream," Hailstorm explained. "We didn't want to have to carry it all the way over here then all the way back to camp."

"Yeah, we'll pick it up on the way home," Echoheart meowed.

"Did you catch anything else?" Whispersong asked.

"No," Hailstorm shook his head.

"That's alright," Clovertail meowed, flicking her tail. "Whispersong and I did, so the Clan will be plenty fed," she purred.

"Good," Echoheart meowed happily.

Soon, the four warriors were walking side by side, each carrying prey. Once they'd picked up Hailstorm and Echoheart's duck, the four headed through the new-leaf forest and back to camp.

Whispersong walked proudly beside her denmates as they entered through the bramble barrier.

"Wow. Great catches!" Sparktail exclaimed, walking beside Moonshine as they headed for the fresh-kill pile. The two mothers glanced on proudly at their kits, eyes gleaming and tails swishing.

"Thanks," purred Clovertail.

"The forest his so warm and green!" exclaimed Echoheart, and Whispersong laughed.

"Yes," Moonshine purred. "I love new-leaf. It's my favorite season."

"Me too," Whispersong purred, dropping her rabbit on the fresh-kill pile.

"What'd you catch? What'd you catch?" mewled excited voices behind them. Whispersong turned around and saw Pinekit, Needlekit, and Rosekit running towards them. The three kits had become much faster, more talkative, and much more trouble in the past moon.

"What'd you bring home today?" Pinekit asked, his dark orange eyes shining as he stared at the warriors.

"Mouse-brain!" Rosekit meowed. "It's right there!"

Pinekit glared at his sister. "How's *I* supposed to know?" he retorted.

Rosekit stuck her tongue out stubbornly, lifting her chin in superiority.

Needlekit rolled his amber eyes at his brother and sister, then ran over to Hailstorm. "Guess what?" he purred, prancing happily around the black and white warrior. Before he could even let Hailstorm answer, Needlekit continued. "Raypaw taught me how to

hunt!"

"Oh really?" Clovertail purred playfully.

"Yeah!" Needlekit meowed, lifting his chin. Then he lowered to the ground, his flank high in the air.

"You look so mouse-brained!" Rosekit burst out laughing.

Needlekit sat up and narrowed his eyes. "I'd like to see you do better!" he retorted, challenging his sister.

But Rosekit didn't hear him; she was rolling in the grass, laughs shaking her small body.

Pinekit nudged his brother, dragging him away from Rosekit and towards their father, who was sitting beside Gravelpelt and Prairiefoot.

Whispersong exchanged an amused glance with her sister, and they smiled.

Rosekit sat up. "Where'd they go?" she asked, looking around the camp. "They left me again! Those fox-hearts!" she complained.

"Rosekit!" exclaimed a voice behind them. Aspenleaf was walking toward them, her cream fur and green eyes nearly identical to her daughter's. "That's not nice! Don't call your brothers that name."

Rosekit muttered something under her breath, narrowing her eyes as her mother walked over to them.

"Come on," Aspenleaf urged. "We're going back to the nursery."

"But I thought you just told us to *leave* the nursery to keep it quiet for Sagetail's kits!" Rosekit complained, sighing.

"I did," Aspenleaf narrowed her eyes. "But now I want you to go back there." Then she looked around the camp. "Where are your brothers?"

Rosekit muttered something inaudible, rolling her eyes.

"Come on," Aspenleaf meowed. "Let's go and find them."

Rosekit sighed, then followed her mother across the clearing.

Whispersong watched them go, then purred in amusement.

Just then, Bronzepelt walked over to the four of them. He meowed, "I'm off to the nursery to give prey to Sagetail, if you want to come see the new kits."

"Sure!" Echoheart purred.

"I saw them yesterday," Clovertail meowed. "And more cats in there would be crowded. I'll wait out here; you guys go see them."

Hailstorm nodded, then turned to Bronzepelt. "I saw your kits yesterday too, with Yellowpaw and Clovertail. I'll wait out here."

"Alright," Whispersong shrugged. "I'll go with you, Echoheart."

They nodded, then lead the way towards the nursery, Echoheart and Whispersong close behind. When they reached the heather bush, Whispersong heard loud mewls coming from inside, while Sagetail whispered soothingly to her two new kits. They stepped inside, Bronzepelt leading the way. When Sagetail saw her mate, she smiled, rubbing her nose to his.

Whispersong looked down at the two kits. One was a dark russet-colored she-kit with a lighter muzzle and the other was a dark tortoiseshell she-kit with white paws.

"Thought of any names yet?" Echoheart asked.

"Yes," Bronzepelt purred.

"This one," Sagetail pointed to the small red she-kit. "Is Cherrykit." Then she ran her tail over the tiny tortoiseshell she-kit and meowed, "And this one is Lilackit."

Whispersong smiled and watched the tiny kits squirming in the curve of their mother's belly, their eyes shut tight and their tiny ears clinging to their small heads.

"They're adorable," Echoheart purred, and Whispersong nodded.

Sagetail licked Lilackit's head, and the tiny she-kit let out a purr. Cherrykit wiggled around her sister, her red fur pressed against Lilackit's dark tortoiseshell fur. Bronzepelt smiled at his two new kits.

Just then Raypaw walked in. He purred as he stared at his tiny sisters. "When will they open their eyes?" he asked, his orange tabby tail flicking in excitement.

"Not for a quarter-moon. But even after they *do* open their eyes, they won't be able to play. Not yet," Sagetail murmured, curling her tail around Cherrykit and Lilackit.

Whispersong looked at her sister. "We should go," she meowed. "The sun's going down and I'm on the dawn patrol tomorrow morning."

Sagetail nodded, not looking up from her kits. Whispersong carefully followed her sister out of the den, just as Aspenleaf headed toward them, Rosekit, Needlekit, and Pinekit close behind her. The three kits had scowls on their faces, and Needlekit complained, "It was just halfway across the camp, not halfway across the forest!"

"Yeah," Pinekit growled. "It's not like we were in DayClan territory or something."

Aspenleaf turned around and glared at them. "No, but you didn't listen. I told you to say hello to the patrol coming back, and that's it. I did not say to wander around the camp, where the warriors are tripping over you!"

The three kits exchanged angry glances, then reluctantly followed their mother into the nursery, Rosekit muttering something in her brothers' ears as they did.

"Come on," Echoheart purred in amusement. "Let's get to sleep."

"Okay," Whispersong yawned, following her sister across the camp towards the warriors' den. As they stepped inside, Whispersong saw Echoheart curl up beside Hailstorm, and Whispersong sighed. She crossed the den and curled up beside Sparrowtail, Eaglefeather and

Meadowheart at her side. Clovertail laid down next to Whispersong. She smiled, then laid her head down on her paws and closed her eyes.

Chapter 6

Echoheart opened her eyes. She was dreaming.

She blinked and looked around her. She was in a green, cliff-like moor, with dirt ledges rising above the ground on some sections. Flowers dotted the grasses like the snow on the distant mountains, and the small rises of dirt contained loose pebbles and rabbit holes. Echoheart realized, with a jolt of shock, that this was the same place where she had had the dream at the Moonfall. She turned; behind her was one of the dirt cliffs that rose up from the grass, kind of like the one in the DawnClan camp, but smaller. Grass hung over the top in clumps, and roots of the bushes clung to the rocks and unsteady dirt they were growing in. Turning around again, she saw the mountains, looking closer than she'd ever seen them before. They rose above the distant trees, peaks swarming with clouds."What? Again?" Ecoheart turned around and saw Whispersong walking up to her.

Another dream with Whispersong? "What's happening?" Echoheart asked her sister.

Whispersong shrugged. "Last time, StarClan warriors came to *us*, so..." Her sister looked around hopefully, but neither she nor Echoheart saw anything.

Echoheart turned and looked around her, and she saw the grass ruffling just in front of the mountains, the wind slowly making its way toward them. The dancing grass carried the breeze across the field, warm with the weather of new-leaf. When it reached them, Echoheart heard Whispersong gasp.

"What?" Echoheart asked in worry.

"It's *saying* something," Whispersong breathed, her brown eyes wide.

"The *wind*?" Echoheart asked disbelievingly.

"Shh," Whispersong meowed quietly.

Echoheart swiveled her ears around, but all she heard was wind. "I don't hear anything," she meowed flatly.

"I... I can't quite understand it," Whispersong replied distractedly, her ears still perked.

Echoheart angled her own ears around in confusion, then turned around, facing the cliff.

"It's saying my name!" Whispersong suddenly gasped.

Echoheart turned toward her sister, startled, then she heard it too. Only it wasn't saying her sister's name, but her own.

"...*Echoheart*..."

Echoheart twitched her ears, realizing that the sound was bouncing off the small wall behind her. Echoheart stared at it in confusion. "I hear it too," she murmured. *It's an echo,* she realized, then jolted with shock.

An echo saying Echoheart.

Understanding flashed in her mind like lightning. The wind had come from the mountains, speaking hers and Whispersong's names...

"Whispersong!" Echoheart gasped. "It's a sign!"

Whispersong turned around. "What?" she asked in confusion.

"The wind first came from the mountains over that way," she began, the pieces finally fitting together. "And at first it was just a whisper, and *you* could hear it." When Whispersong didn't respond, Echoheart meowed, "*Whisper*song? Whispers! Don't you get it?" Whispersong cocked her head, her eyes widening. "Then, the sound of the wind *echoed* off the cliff right there, and *I* could hear it! *You* could hear the whispering of the wind and *I* could hear its echo! *Whispers* and *echoes*, like the StarClan cats told us moons ago!"

Suddenly Whispersong's face lit up with understanding. "It *is* a sign! For us, only we can hear it, and it was coming from the mountains!" Then she paused, and Echoheart stared at her. "It's calling us to the mountains, the whispers and echoes."

Echoheart blinked. A call? To the *mountains?*

Suddenly a voice whispered through the night, echoing ominously in both cats' ears. "Find the cats that live behind a waterfall, the cats that overpower eagles, the cats whose home forever lies in the mountains. Treacherous skies lay ahead, but it may be the Clans' only hope..."

Echoheart shuddered.

Then she remembered: Goldheart had said that a StarClan had told him that the Two in DawnClan would be leaving in new-leaf! It was new-leaf now, so would Echoheart and Whispersong really have to travel into the mountains? Would they have to leave their Clan?

"It *is* a call to the mountains! We need to travel to the mountains, like Goldheart told us a few moons ago," Whispersong murmured quietly.

"But... but what about our Clan?" Echoheart murmured in worry. "Rainstar has never been more of a threat! We can't risk leaving if Rainstar could destroy our Clan at any given heartbeat!"

Whispersong shook her head. "I know, but what is more threatening to the Clans: Rainstar and DayClan? Or the StarClan-prophesied danger that could destroy everything we know?"

Echoheart stared at the mountains behind her, stomach churning with fear. Whispersong had a point. Rainstar and DayClan were one force, but the StarClan-prophesied danger had ten times more force. Echoheart sighed. She and Whispersong were the Two; they were chosen to fulfill the prophecy, and going to the mountains may help them.

"You're right. As the Two, we... we need to leave. I just feel so awful! StarClan is telling us to leave our Clan, but our Clan needs

us! And our Clanmates don't even know about the prophecy! They'll think we've deserted them, or that we've died!"

"I know," Whispersong bowed her head. "But we need to do this; it's for the sake of our Clan, for *all* the Clans. I'll protect them even if they don't trust me anymore."

"Me too," Echoheart sighed, bowing her head.

"The question is: when would we leave?"

There was a silence.

"Well, the StarClan cats said— in our dream at the Moonfall— that new-leaf was when we'd go, and it's new-leaf now. *Halfway* through new-leaf, actually."

"So, as... as soon as possible?"

Echoheart closed her eyes, guilt swarming in her stomach like bees. "Yes, I think so."

"We should say goodbye," Whispersong meowed quietly, looking sad.

Echoheart knew her mind was drifting to Bumblefrost.
"Whispersong," Echoheart meowed sternly. "We mustn't tell any cat! If DawnClan found out, our Clanmates might insist on sending warriors with us, or prevent us from going! And where would that lead us and the Clan? We can't make the Clan give up warriors for us. The Clans needs as many warriors as it can right now... but we also need to go to the mountains. The Clans' survival may depend on it."

"I know," Whispersong sighed. "What you're saying about DawnClan is true, and I won't tell any of our Clanmates. But I can't leave Bumblefrost without telling him! You know that. Imagine how he'd feel..."

Echoheart narrowed her eyes. "This is a dream," she reminded her sister. "We'll worry about it when we wake up."

Just then, the world started spinning around her, and Echoheart could no longer see her sister. She felt dizzy, and she closed her eyes, feeling her paws lift from the ground and her mind drift away from her control, away...away...

"Echoheart!"

Echoheart opened her eyes. To her relief, she was safely inside the warriors' den.

"Echoheart!" It was Eaglefeather. "Come on, we're on the dawn patrol."

"The dawn patrol?" Echoheart yawned, standing up to stretch.

"Yes, me, you, Meadowheart, Sunfur, and Whispersong." He sounded annoyed.

"Okay," she yawned again, carefully walking outside of the den. She blinked away the bright sunlight as she stepped into the clearing. The sun was rising through the trees, its warm rays glowing on the leaves and flowers. The clouds above, wispy and thin, were bright orange, floating through the sky like feathers. Dew clung to the ferns and grass, wetting Echoheart's paws as she followed Eaglefeather towards Sunfur, Meadowheart, and Whispersong.

"Let's go," Meadowheart yawned as they reached them, turning around and matching her pace with Eaglefeather's as they left the camp. Sunfur stared after them, her brown eyes glimmering with amusement and affection as she watched her son.

Echoheart stepped in pace with Whispersong, and sensed that her sister's mind was wandering to a certain DayClan cat. "Stop thinking of Bumblefrost," she hissed in her ear.

"I need to talk to him," Whispersong insisted quietly. "The next Gathering is nearly a *moon* away, and we can't afford to wait that long—"

"Can't *afford* to wait that long?" Echoheart hissed. "No, we *won't* wait that long."

Whispersong took in a sharp intake of breath, glaring at Echoheart.

Echoheart gritted her teeth. Why was she so concerned about that stupid DayClan cat? Wasn't protecting the Clans more important?

There was a long silence in which Echoheart heard Eaglefeather and Meadowheart talking about the great abundance of prey and warmth, while Sunfur sniffed the grasses as she walked, tail flicking. Echoheart stepped over a mossy stone and a pair of mushrooms, sighing.

When *would* they leave? A quarter moon? A few sunrises? *Tomorrow* ?

Echoheart turned to Whispersong. "So, um, when do you suppose we should leave?" A knot of guilt tightened in her stomach as the thought of deserting her Clanmates filled her mind again.

"I don't know."

"I think we should go in a few sunrises or so," Echoheart murmured sadly, "That way we'll have time to think it over before... leaving."

Whispersong nodded and took a deep breath. "Alright. But I *need* to talk to Bumblefrost."

"Fine," Echoheart muttered, knowing that her sister wouldn't leave without saying goodbye to the DayClan warrior. "When?"

"Now," Whispersong meowed determinedly, staring out at the meadow.

Echoheart followed her sister's gaze across the river and into the moor and saw the DayClan dawn patrol. To Echoheart's relief, Bumblefrost was on it; at least Whispersong wouldn't have to sneak into DayClan's territory.

Whispersong let out an annoyed growl.

"What?" Echoheart stared in confusion at her sister.

"Songtail's here too," she muttered, glaring at the DayClan she-cat

across the river.

Echoheart knew that Songtail was Bumblefrost's sister, but she wondered why Whispersong would dislike her so much. They didn't know each other! They had probably never even talked!

As they got to the river, Whispersong crept away from the patrol. Echoheart sighed, then followed her, glancing behind her. She saw, to her relief, that Meadowheart, Sunfur, and Eaglefeather hadn't noticed their escape.

"Bumblefrost!" Whispersong hissed as they reached the riverbank. The tan and black striped warrior turned his head, confusion in his pale green eyes. "Over here!"

Bumblefrost glanced at Whispersong, his confusion gone in a heartbeat and eyes lighting up when he saw her. Echoheart glared at him. What would happen when he saw *her*? Last time she'd been with both Whispersong and Bumblefrost, Bumblefrost had looked like he'd wanted to claw her. Echoheart felt her fur bristling as the large DayClan warrior got closer.

"Whispersong! What is it?" Then he saw Echoheart, and his eyes narrowed. "What's *she* doing here?" Echoheart flattened her ears at the DayClan warrior, but Whispersong rested her tail on her flank, telling her to calm down.

Why should I calm down? she thought angrily. *This is an enemy warrior who looks like he'd very well like to shred me and the rest of DawnClan!*

"I need to tell you something," Whispersong murmured.

"And why does your sister need to be here?" he growled, glaring at Echoheart.

Echoheart found it hard to believe that Bumblefrost and Whispersong would *like* each other; Bumblefrost seemed as mean and stubborn as a badger awoken from its hibernation in leaf-bare.

"It's okay," Whispersong meowed. "She's a part of this, too." Whispersong paused, avoiding Bumblefrost's eyes. "It's just that...

well... we had a dream from StarClan last night—"

Echoheart glared at her sister. Why would she tell this *DayClan* cat that they'd had a dream from StarClan? What did it matter? That was *their* secret to know, not Bumblefrost's! *Get to the point!* Echoheart thought angrily, lashing her tail.

Whispersong murmured quietly. "Well, it was a call to the mountains. It's very urgent. So, we are leaving in a few sunrises—"

"What? Why do you need to go to the *mountains* ? What about your Clan? No one's ever gone to the mountains!" Bumblefrost exclaimed, his pale green eyes full of confusion and his tail drooping. "What if something happens to you?" he asked. "How would I live on, knowing I might never see you again?"

"Don't worry," Whispersong murmured, her voice choked by sadness. "We'll stay protected. We'll be safe."

"Yes you will," Bumblefrost murmured determinedly, and Echoheart felt uncomfortable at the green fire burning in his eyes. Then he looked awkwardly at Echoheart, eyes narrowed.

Echoheart back out of the reeds in annoyance. "I'll let you two say goodbye to each other then," she growled through gritted teeth and flattened ears.

Whispersong gave Echoheart a grateful look, then turned back to Bumblefrost. Echoheart padded away from the river, back towards the dawn patrol. Meadowheart, Sunfur, and Eaglefeather looked at her in confusion.

"Where were you? And where's Whispersong?" Sunfur asked in a mixture between worry and annoyance.

"We were renewing the scent markers over by the edge of the river upstream," lied Echoheart quickly, feeling a tight knot of guilt form in her stomach as she said this. She was standing up for her sister's forbidden relationship with a DayClan warrior by lying to her own Clanmates! But Echoheart continued anyways. "Whispersong is checking something out and will be right back. She wanted me to

come and tell you so that you don't get worried."

"Okay," Meadowheart meowed, turning back towards Eaglefeather. Sunfur glanced across the river, and Echoheart followed her gaze. Songtail was following a muscular black tom Echoheart didn't recognize and a dark orange tabby tom that Echoheart knew as Foxfang. Songtail was glancing over her shoulders every now and then, her white-tipped tail flicking in confusion. Echoheart guessed she was looking for her brother.

Hurry up, Whispersong! Echoheart growled to herself.

"Okay, I'm back," meowed a voice behind them. Echoheart turned and saw Whispersong padding toward them, and Echoheart sighed in relief. "Ready to go?"

They nodded, and the five DawnClan cats continued back through the forest.

Whispersong lingered at the back of the patrol, looking troubled. She glanced at Echoheart and murmured, "I'm sorry, in advance."

"What?" Echoheart asked warily. What had happened after she'd left Bumblefrost and Whispersong by the river? "Come on, what happened?" she muttered.

Whispersong took a deep breath, then murmured, "Bumblefrost said, 'Of course you'll be safe, because I'll be there to protect you.' I told him he shouldn't, that you'd be mad, but he didn't listen." Whispersong looked at her paws. "He insisted on coming with us."

Echoheart sighed, a low growl forming in her throat. "Why don't you just tell him you hate him and move on with life?"

"I can't!" Whispersong exclaimed, looking as though Echoheart had just asked her to jump off a cliff. "I love him! He's one of my best friends!"

"You have loads of other friends: your *Clanmates*. You don't need a stupid DayClan cat when you have all of DawnClan!"

"None of them understand me like he does!"

"*I* do! He doesn't know about the prophecy, but I do. He does not understand you like you think he does, Whispersong!"

"You don't know him! And you don't know how much more he understands me than *you* !"

Echoheart felt stung by these words, then snarled, "I know him enough to see he's a stubborn, angry, stereotypical DayClan cat!"

"He is *not* stereotypical! He's not like any of the rest of his Clanmates. If you took the time to get to know him, you'd see!"

"I don't *want* to get to know him! *I'm* staying loyal to my Clan!" Echoheart hissed, lashing her tail and baring her teeth in frustration.

"What do you think *I'm* doing? I'm showing more loyalty than most by sacrificing their trust in me and going to the mountains to protect them!"

"Well," Echoheart growled, "you're losing some of that trust anyway by being *friends* with Bumblefrost! If you want to truly be loyal to your Clan, you need to stop seeing that DayClan cat!"

"I told you: I know that! Bumblefrost and I both do. We know we can't go on like this. We're trying to sort it all out, okay?"

Echoheart let out an angry sniff. "Huh. Well, you need to figure it out soon, because this is causing more trouble than it's worth."

Whispersong flattened her ears. "No it's not!"

"Well, we'll see how much it was worth it once I tell Eveningstar."

"What?" Whispersong gasped. "You wouldn't!"

"I will, if it doesn't stop, and soon," Echoheart growled.

Whispersong hissed, "You don't understand! I can't leave him!"

"I'm leaving Hailstorm," Echoheart pointed out, claws stabbing at her heart as she remembered that she'd be leaving the black- and

white-patched warrior, the cat she loved most dearly, when they left. She shook her head. "Look," she growled. "I don't want a stupid DayClan cat on *our* journey from *our* dream to protect *our* Clan."

"Well in case you don't remember, the prophecy said that the forest will be united as *one*! This isn't just about DawnClan and you know it! It's about *all four* Clans, DayClan too!" Whispersong growled, glaring at Echoheart through misted eyes, then she caught up with Meadowheart and Eaglefeather, racing ahead, and not looking back.

Echoheart let out a sigh. How was she ever going to get Whispersong to see what a mistake this was?

* * *

Echoheart sat by the sunning-stones, staring blankly off in the distance. She hadn't been able to sleep last night; nightmares about deserting her Clan had clawed into her mind and kept her up all night. For the last few days, all she'd been thinking about was her and Whispersong's dream, and the fact that they had to leave their Clan for the mountains.

Why did they have to go to the mountains? DawnClan would think they'd deserted them! They'd think she'd abandoned them; they'd think she didn't care about them! Or, Echoheart thought with sadness, they would think she and Whispersong had died.

Echoheart shivered, but not from the weather. It was warm out, and the cloudless blue sky expanded endlessly over their heads.

Whispersong had joined a hunting patrol earlier, but Echoheart could tell that with her worry, Whispersong would hardly be able to focus. She was taking it better than Echoheart, though. She didn't show her worry as much, but Echoheart knew that Whispersong hadn't been able to sleep much last night either. Echoheart hadn't been on a patrol since the one on which Whispersong had met Bumblefrost by the river, two days ago.

Echoheart blinked and crouched down, putting her weight on her paws. She twitched her tail in anxiousness. When would she and Whispersong decide to leave? Since their dream, Echoheart had

been constantly worried, and constantly fretting over deserting her Clanmates. And that wasn't all she was fearing. They'd be leaving the familiar territory, the only place they'd ever known. What unfamiliar dangers lie up there in the mountains? Stone cliffs towering over the ground below? Jagged rocky spires that could slice a cat in half if fallen on? Icy paths leading to one of them falling off a cliff and meeting instant death? Snow drifts so big they could suffocate? Echoheart shuddered. Not to mention all the vicious creatures that lived beyond Clan territories, and Twolegplaces that were no doubt scattered everywhere. Maybe even other cats— kittypets, rogues, and loners— so protective of their territories that they would kill trespassers without hesitation.

Echoheart shivered again, feeling her heart sink even lower into her stomach in fear. The more she thought about it, the more reluctant she was to leave. She knew that the Clans and the fulfilment of the prophecy depended on her and Whispersong, but it just sounded better to stay here. It was safer, much safer; her Clan wouldn't ever doubt her; and Echoheart and Whispersong wouldn't have much to worry about. But she knew they would have to leave eventually. Echoheart sighed deeper, sadness and fear enveloping her like a fog.

"Echoheart?"

Echoheart jumped, paws instinctively springing her from the ground. She felt her tail bristling, and she lashed it.

"It's only me," Hailstorm murmured, looking concerned for her.

Echoheart felt a flood of more guilt. She and Whispersong hadn't mentioned their dream, and the fact that they were leaving, to any cat besides Bumblefrost, which Echoheart hadn't permitted. Not even Hailstorm, or Sparktail, or Rustypelt knew.

"What's wrong?" Hailstorm asked. "I've been noticing that you and Whispersong are becoming more and more distant, like you're not here anymore."

It sure feels like it, Echoheart thought sadly.

"What's on your mind? You know you can tell me anything."

Echoheart looked into Hailstorm's bright blue eyes. *I wish I could*, she thought.

"I'm just worried about DayClan's threat," she lied. It wasn't that she *wasn't* worried about DayClan; she was, but DayClan hadn't crossed her mind in her worry about leaving her own Clan. Echoheart blinked. DayClan would still be a threat after she and Whispersong left; there wasn't a doubt about that. But Echoheart hadn't thought about Rainstar or her plans in the past few days, not even once. "Rainstar's got to have another plan," she added.

Hailstorm blinked and sat down beside her. "Yeah, but we'll stay strong." He looked at her again, and Echoheart could tell he knew that DayClan wasn't what was really bothering her. "Are you sure nothing else is wrong?"

"I'm fine," she murmured.

Hailstorm blinked in sadness at her, then got to his paws and padded across the camp to Twigfoot.

Echoheart sighed. *Oh StarClan, what are we going to do?*

When Whispersong had returned from her hunting patrol, carrying a puny mouse, Echoheart immediately got to her paws and joined her. "How are you?" she asked quietly.

Whispersong shrugged. "Fine. But I could hardly focus; this stupid, pathetic scrap was all I caught." She threw it onto the fresh-kill pile, then whispered, "Prairiefoot and Moonshine started noticing that I couldn't focus, and they look concerned."

"Every cat has been watching me worriedly all day too," Echoheart murmured.

"I can't do with this waiting any longer. When are we going to leave? It'd be better if it was soon."

"Whatcha doin'?"

Echoheart jumped. Pinekit was trotting up to them, tail high.

"Talking about warrior stuff," Whispersong meowed evasively.

"Like what?" the tiny brown kit asked with big eyes.

"Nothing," Echoheart muttered. "Go find your littermates."

Pinekit sniffed. "Fine. You're boring anyway." Then he turned and marched away, looking arrogant.

Echoheart raised her paw, ready to give the kit a cuff around the ears, but Whispersong jabbed her with her elbow. Echoheart knew her worry was making her temper short, and she tried to contain it. She breathed heavily. "That kit."

Whispersong didn't say anything.

They watched Pinekit for several heartbeats, then Whispersong turned to Echoheart. "So, when are we going to leave? I prefer sooner rather than later."

"I think we should leave tomorrow morning," Echoheart muttered, still staring at Aspenleaf's three kits. "I don't like it, but, like our dream said: the mountains, and the cats we're supposed to find, can help us with the danger." She glanced at Whispersong. "The prophecy is going to unfold; we're going to have to know how to fight off this oncoming danger. Remember we are the Two. The mountains may be our only hope to find out more. And the danger must be nearing," she shuddered, then sighed. "Also, if we leave tomorrow, we won't have to feel even more guilty; we'll just... be getting it over with. If we stay, we'll hesitate. We need to find out about this creature, because if we don't, the Clans may be destroyed."

"But do you know how many cats will be out tomorrow morning?" Whispersong murmured, "Border patrols, hunting patrols, training sessions..."

"Yes, but we've sat for two days, looking depressed, and every cat has started noticing. We need to leave, Whispersong. I know you don't like it, and neither do I, but we *have* to. We have to."

Whispersong let out a ragged breath. "Well then how about

tonight?"

Echoheart sighed and stared at the camp around her, heart pounding at her sister's suggestion. "Yeah, I... I guess. We'll just get more hesitant and more fearful and more reluctant the longer we wait." Even though she didn't like the idea of leaving so soon, they had to get going. Who knew when the danger would finally come? And the longer they waited, the more hesitant they'd get. "Let's have some fresh-kill then," Echoheart meowed. "We're... we're going to need our strength."

Whispersong nodded. "I'll be right there; I'm going to see if Sparrowtail will eat with me," she meowed sadly, and Echoheart knew she wanted to share one last meal with the brown tabby warrior before they left.

Echoheart watched her sister walking to the warriors' den, then turned to the fresh-kill pile. The sun was sinking through the trees, not yet changing the colors of the sky. She stared at the pile of prey for a while, then sighed and picked out a lark half-heartedly.

Hailstorm walked over to her again, sitting beside her. "Are you feeling better?" he asked again in concern.

"I'm fine," Echoheart murmured, taking a bite of the lark to hide her face. No matter how much she loved Hailstorm, she couldn't, wouldn't, tell him that she and Whispersong were leaving tonight for the mountains; he would insist on telling some cat, or coming with them. She pushed the lark toward Hailstorm. "Want to share?"

Hailstorm smiled sadly at her. "Sure." Then he bent down and took a bite from the prey.

Echoheart looked across the clearing and watched her Clanmates bustle happily about the camp, the cats she'd be leaving tonight. Spruceclaw was sitting beside Aspenleaf's three kits, telling them one of the Clans' legends. Creekfall, Bronzepelt, Sunfur and Eveningstar were laughing as Raypaw showed them proudly of the new move he'd learned in training with his mentor, Twigfoot. Aspenleaf and Moonshine were sharing tongues beside the sunning-stones, Sparktail dozing off beside them. Prairiefoot and

Meadowheart were pushing their way into the nursery to give Sagetail a piece of fresh-kill. Eaglefeather and Clovertail were batting at each other and practicing their fighting moves.

Then Echoheart saw Yellowpaw and Goldheart returning from the forest and heading into their den, new herbs in their jaws. A thought struck Echoheart; the medicine cats had had a dream from StarClan saying that two of their Clan would leave in new-leaf. They'd told Echoheart and Whispersong. *And* she and Whispersong had told them about their first dream and the prophecy. The medicine cats had a right to know that they were leaving. That way, if any cat became too worried, Goldheart or Yellowpaw would assure the Clan that she and Whispersong were not dead. Plus, they'd get traveling herbs if she told Goldheart, and she knew how much traveling herbs helped from her experience with the trip to the Moonfall.

"I have to see Goldheart," she told Hailstorm, who immediately looked worried. "I'm fine; I just feel a little light-headed. I'll be back," she assured him, then padded across the clearing and into the medicine cats den. "Goldheart?"

Goldheart peered around the corner, herbs hanging from is mouth. "Yes?" he mumbled.

"I need to talk to you two."

Goldheart looked confused, then summoned Yellowpaw with a flick of his tail.

Once the two medicine cats sat in front of her, Echoheart began. "Remember, all those moons ago, when Whispersong and I told you about our dreams, about a prophecy we'd heard? And when you told us that you'd had a dream saying that two from DawnClan will leave in new-leaf?"

Goldheart's orange eyes filled with understanding. "Are *you* and *Whispersong* leaving?"

Echoheart couldn't stop the surprise that filled her face. *How'd he figure that out so fast?*

Yellowpaw looked at her mentor. "What?" she asked worriedly.

"Are you?" Goldheart repeated.

Echoheart nodded sadly. "Please don't tell any cat, or else they may stop us from going. Whispersong and I had a dream from StarClan a few nights ago." Quickly she recounted their dream, explaining the whispers and echoes they'd heard, and how they realized that it was a call from the mountains.

Goldheart stared at the stone floor of the den, deep in thought. "That makes sense," he meowed. "When are you leaving then?"

"Tonight," she sighed sadly. "It's urgent; I *know* it is. I don't want to leave, but we *must*. It will help with the danger in that prophecy, according to those StarClan cats."

"But tonight?" Yellowpaw exclaimed.

Echoheart nodded. "We *have* to."

Goldheart looked up at Echoheart. "You need traveling herbs. Go and get Whispersong."

"But it's not even dark yet," Echoheart protested.

Goldheart had turned around and was rummaging through his stash of herbs. "It's almost dusk. You should leave now, and tell any cat who asks that you want to take a walk with your sister. That way you won't have to sneak out, or navigate through the forest in the dark."

"Oh," Echoheart sighed, staring at her paws. She didn't want it to be *this* rushed.

"Go and get her," Goldheart ordered. "Yellowpaw, go with her."

Yellowpaw nodded, and Echoheart followed the medicine cat apprentice towards the warriors' den. "Whispersong?" she called.

"She's sharing prey with Sparrowtail by the sunning-stones," Gravelpelt meowed, emerging from the den.

"Okay, thanks," Yellowpaw meowed, and Echoheart followed her toward the center of the the camp, where they found Whispersong and Sparrowtail sharing a finch.

"Whispersong?"

Whispersong looked up at Yellowpaw's voice, looking concerned. "Yes?"

"Goldheart and I need to see something really fast. Can you come with me for a little bit?" Yellowpaw meowed smoothly.

"Okay... I'll... I'll be right back, Sparrowtail."

Sparrowtail blinked. "Okay."

"What?" Whispersong hissed in Echoheart's ear when they were nearing the medicine cats den.

"Just wait," Echoheart answered her sister. She followed Yellowpaw through the vines draping over the stone hollow, hearing Whispersong right behind her.

"Here," Goldheart meowed immediately after he saw them both, herbs ready on the stone floor. "Eat."

Whispersong stared at the herbs in confusion. She sniffed them, and looked up. "Traveling herbs?" Then she turned to Echoheart. "You told them?"

"Some cat had to know," she shrugged. "Goldheart suggested we leave right away."

"Right now?" Whispersong asked, her brown eyes wide with fright. "But. Oh, Echoheart, I'm not ready to leave!" she groaned quietly.

"We have to, Whispersong," Echoheart sighed sadly. "We *have* to."

She recalled their dream they'd had at the Moonfall many moons ago: *'Follow the stars, and have faith in each other and your choices... We'll be waiting for you.'* Echoheart sighed. They had to have faith in their choices; they had to do what was right, and going to the

mountains was doing what was right.

Goldheart pushed the herbs closer to them. "Eat those up. And Whispersong, you and Echoheart are going out on a *walk*," he emphasized.

Whispersong seemed to understand. "Alright," she meowed sadly, bending down to lap up the herbs, her face wrinkling up as she chewed them.

Echoheart bent down and ate her own herbs, the foul taste lingering in her mouth long after she'd swallowed them. "Thank you," she meowed gratefully to the two medicine cats.

Goldheart dipped his head. Yellowpaw ran up to them and nosed their fur. "I can't believe you're leaving. Well," she let out a long exhale. "Goodbye, and be safe." Then she stepped back. "May StarClan light your path."

"Thank you. And may StarClan light DawnClan's path while we're away." Whispersong murmured.

"Take care of the Clan," Echoheart told them, feeling empty inside, and Yellowpaw nodded. Echoheart turned and followed her sister out of the den, her paws feeling numb. They were *leaving.* Leaving their Clan, leaving their friends, leaving their family. What if they never came back? No, she wouldn't think like that, couldn't.

Echoheart shook her head in a trance-like finality; she couldn't turn back. Not now. *Not now*, she told herself firmly.

A cold stone dropped in her stomach as Sparktail and Hailstorm ran over to them. "What's wrong? Why were you in Goldheart's den?" Sparktail asked.

"We're fine," Whispersong assured them, avoiding Sparktail's second question.

"Where are you going?" Hailstorm asked, looking them over.

Can he sense our fear? Echoheart wondered, agony filling her heart. She tried to sound calm as she lied, "Out for a walk." Her stomach

filled with guilt and she had to look away.

"I'll go with you," Hailstorm suggested, looking at her sympathetically.

"No, we're okay, Hailstorm," Echoheart meowed, trying to sound happy. "I'll take a hunt with you tomorrow." Her throat tightened at the lie; she wouldn't hunt with him tomorrow, nor the next day, and not for a long, long time. What would he think when he woke up to find them gone?

"Alright," he purred, and Echoheart felt even more guilty that he'd believed her.

Sparktail told her daughters, "And don't stay out too long."

"We won't," Whispersong meowed, and Echoheart sensed her sister's own guilt.

Hailstorm ran up and licked Echoheart's cheek. "Good night," he purred.

"Good night," she replied. *Goodbye*, she added to herself sadly.

Her heart was unable to bear the fact that she wouldn't see him tomorrow. She ignored the grief pulling her heart toward him, and firmly kept her paws where they were. She *couldn't* say goodbye, she *had* to pretend she was just going on a walk.

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she couldn't take it any longer. She turned away and lead her sister from the camp. Her paws trembled, and the tears finally spilled over. She glanced over her shoulder, the forest glowing in the orange sunset. Echoheart's heart twisted. How long would it be until she saw the DawnClan camp again, her home? She caught a glimpse of Hailstorm walking with Clovertail back to the warriors' den, and she felt tears racing down her face as her denmates disappeared inside the den. How long would it be until she saw those faces again? How many moons would pass?

"Come on," Whispersong sighed, her own tail drooping. "The sun is setting."

"Alright," Echoheart choked, staring at the DawnClan camp in longing.

Echoheart shook her head and turned to look in front of her. It was time to look at what would lie ahead, and forget about what lay behind them. That was the only way the Clans could survive. Echoheart took a deep breath, then followed her sister past the Great Pine, and didn't glance back.

We will *return. I promise.*

* * *

By the time they reached the meadow, the sunlight had completely faded away. Stars now filled the blackening sky, while a crescent moon hung dimly above their heads. Echoheart walked through the cold grass, glowing silver in the weak light of the moon and stars. Ahead, Echoheart saw the river, reflecting the sky above. Just beside the riverbank on DayClan's side, Echoheart saw the silhouette of a cat, and, as they got closer, Echoheart recognized who it was. Bumblefrost raced across the stepping-stones and toward the two DawnClan cats.

Echoheart felt anger burst inside her, and she unsheathed her claws.

"There you are!" the DayClan warrior meowed, running straight through the meadow on DawnClan's territory and rubbing his muzzle on Whispersong's head.

"What are you doing on our territory? And how did you know we were leaving today?" Echoheart snarled, feeling even more furious after seeing Bumblefrost touching her sister. *What right does he have? He's a* DayClan *warrior!*

Bumblefrost flattened his ears, then lifted his chin, broad shoulders making him look threatening. "I've been patrolling this area for the last few days. I knew you'd be leaving soon, and I've been waiting." He looked at Whispersong, and she smiled.

Echoheart did not smile. "Go home," she snarled. "This is *our* journey."

"I'm coming, and that's that. You can't stop me," Bumblefrost growled, his tail lashing.

"Oh really? You can beat two of us?" she laughed.

"*Two* ?" Bumblefrost echoed tauntingly. "You really think Whispersong will attack me?"

Echoheart opened her mouth to hiss at him, but stopped. He was right. Whiserpsong would never attack the DayClan warrior, a cat she knew her sister cared about very dearly, though she didn't like to remember it. "Fine," Echoheart growled, lashing her tail.

"He can come?" Echoheart hated that Whispersong's eyes shone when she said this.

Echoheart's neck fur rose and she growled quietly, "Fine, fine, *fine*." She flattened her ears against her head, knowing she'd regret agreeing to this. "He... he can come. But *we* are leading this journey, not you."

"And who knows DayClan territory better?" Bumblefrost retorted.

"Stop trying to control me! This is *our* dream and *our* journey, and *we're* leading it!"

"Echoheart, he's... he's right," Whispersong meowed, stepping between Echoheart and Bumblefrost. "Let him take us through DayClan territory. *Then* you can lead, alright?"

Echoheart disliked that her sister stood up for Bumblefrost, but she tried her best to ignore it. There was no room for arguing on this journey; that'd only slow them down. Echoheart turned to the DayClan warrior. "Alright," she growled, "but one step wrong, or if a DayClan cat sees us, you're crowfood, and I will personally drive you from this group."

"Okay, okay," Bumblefrost rolled his eyes, his tail flicking in annoyance. "Calm your fur." Bumblefrost turned around and headed back toward the river. Whispersong turned and trotted beside him, tail high. Echoheart could sense her sister's excitement, which made Echoheart even more upset she'd allowed the DayClan cat to come.

Echoheart growled to herself. *I'm going to regret this.*

She sighed, then followed the two out of DawnClan territory without not looking back.

Chapter 7

Hailstorm opened his eyes, blinking away sleep.

He turned over and purred, remembering that Echoheart had promised to hunt with him today. He rolled around, looking at Echoheart's nest. But it was empty.

Hailstorm rolled his eyes. *Probably gone out with Whispersong somewhere.*

He stretched, his paws brushing against Echoheart's nest. It was cold. He got to his paws cautiously and sniffed around, but her scent was stale. His heart skipped a beat. Hailstorm padded cautiously to Whispersong's nest, but it was cold and stale too. Neither of them had slept here last night! That meant that they hadn't come back from their walk!

Hailstorm raced out of the warriors' den, nearly knocking Pinekit and Needlekit off their paws. He threw an apology hastily over his shoulder as he finally found the cat he'd been looking for. "Twigfoot!" he called to his father.

Twigfoot looked around. "What is it?" he asked worriedly, his dusky brown ears and tail twitching in concern.

"Echoheart and Whispersong didn't sleep in the warriors' den last night. They're gone! They're missing!" Worry for Echoheart was making him hysterical. "What if a fox got them? Or DayClan? Or—"

Twigfoot cut him off. "When did you last see them?" he asked.

"Last night, a-at dusk," Hailstorm stuttered. "They said they were going out f-for a walk, but they didn't come back!"

"I'm sure they're fine. They're full-grown warriors; they wouldn't let anything happen to each other. But we'll find them," Twigfoot promised, and he jogged over to the High-stone, Hailstorm

following. "Eveningstar?" Twigfoot called.

"Yes?" Eveningstar was out of the den in a heartbeat.

"Echoheart and Whispersong haven't been seen since last night. They didn't sleep in their nests. Hailstorm is worried something bad has happened to them."

"What?" Eveningstar perked his ears in worry.

"What if a fox got to them? Or DayClan?" Hailstorm repeated, heart pounding.

"I bet they're fine. But I'll call a Clan meeting anyways," Eveningstar meowed. He jumped to the edge of the High-stone. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the High-stone for a Clan meeting!"

Cats immediately gathered at the base of the High-stone, staring up at Eveningstar, Twigfoot, and Hailstorm in confusion.

"Cats of DawnClan," he yowled. "Hailstorm reported to me that Echoheart and Whispersong didn't sleep in their nests last night, and haven't returned from the forest since dusk yesterday." Fearful murmuring swept through the camp, spreading like fire and burning with just as much intensity. "Silence, please!" Eveningstar called, raising his tail to quiet the Clan. Then he continued. "There's no need to panic. They're grown warriors. But the tensions with DayClan are high right now, so we have to be suspicious of an absence of this long. Has any cat seen them recently? Or at least scented them since last night?"

Everyone shook their heads, glancing at other cats in worry.

Eveningstar blinked, and Hailstorm could sense that his leader's calm was dissipating, and was replaced with worry. "Okay. We'll find them. I don't want any of you to worry though; cats have been gone for this long before. But the forest is dangerous right now, so we ought to know where all of our cats are."

Rustypelt spoke up. "I'll lead a search party!" he volunteered.

"Alright," Eveningstar nodded. "Take only a few warriors with you; we need some here."

The gray-brown tom nodded, then stepped forward from the crowd. "Who wants to come with me?"

"I do," Sparktail replied at once, her brown eyes blazing.

"I'll go too," Hailstorm spoke up, leaping off the High-stone and jogging toward Rustypelt and Sparktail.

"Me too," Sparrowtail volunteered.

Rustypelt nodded at his patrol, then lead them all outside the camp. He stopped once they were nearing the Great Pine. "Alright. Let's find their scent trail," he meowed, lowering his nose to the ground.

"I smell them," Sparktail meowed, sounding hopeful. "They went this way."

Rustypelt nodded, jogging after his mate and over the log-bridge. Sparrowtail looked at Hailstorm, concern in her deep brown eyes. Hailstorm nodded sympathetically at her, then turned and followed the two older warriors, with Sparrowtail behind him.

Soon Rustypelt came to a halt. "I lost it," he growled in frustration.

Sparrowtail and Sparktail shared a glance, then they turned left and tried to pick up the scent around a tight grove of oak trees, and Hailstorm turned to the right, nosing his way through some bracken. The dew filled his face, moistening his eyes and nose, and he sneezed. Then he lowered his muzzle back down into the dirt, and finally he picked up a faint scent of Echoheart, and an even more stale trace of Whispersong. "I found their trail!" he announced.

The three other warriors ran to Hailstorm's side, and Rustypelt sniffed the patch of daisies near where Hailstorm had found the trial. "I don't smell anything," he muttered in worry.

"I do," Hailstorm meowed determinedly, recalling something Echoheart had said to him when they were kits all those moons ago... *'You'll be the best tracker DawnClan has seen for many seasons!'*

Hope blazed in Hailstorm's heart, and he followed their scent-trail, his worry and love for Echoheart driving him forward.

The scent-trail led them to the meadow, where it was more recent, and much stronger.

"It's stronger here," Sparrowtail meowed. "I can smell them now."

"They must have stayed here for a bit," Sparktail observed, sniffing the long grass of the meadow.

Then Rustypelt's neck fur rose. "Do you smell that?" he hissed.

"What?" Sparktail looked around in fright.

"The scent that's mixed with theirs."

Hailstorm sniffed the ground again, and sure enough, he picked up the scent of something that caused his pelt to bristled along his spine. *DayClan*.

"They were here at the same time," Sparrowtail murmured, lifting her white muzzle from the ground. She shook her brown tabby pelt in a shiver. "Their scent still makes my paws tingle."

"It smells like only one or two DayClan cats were here," Hailstorm meowed, "But it's hard to tell with them intermingled like this."

"Let's follow it," Rustypelt meowed, leading the way with his nose to the ground.

Hailstorm followed and lashed his tail when he realized that the scent-trail was leading them to the river. "They crossed the river. The DayClan cats and Echoheart and Whispersong," Hailstorm muttered. "But why?"

"Good question," Sparktail growled in worry. "If there was a DayClan cat or two here, why didn't they fight them off? They would have beat them!"

"Yes," Rustypelt muttered, smelling the edge of the river. "It *seems* like Echoheart and Whispersong went to DayClan territory with

DayClan cats, but they went willingly."

"Willingly?" Sparktail exclaimed, her voice cracking. "But—"

"There isn't any fear-scent, or blood," Rustypelt growled, amber eyes narrowed. "They crossed the river with DayClan cats, without a fight."

"Why?" Hailstorm asked, sniffing the reeds. "They wouldn't let DayClan boss them around, trust me. They wouldn't go with DayClan cats without a fight!"

"They had to have gone willingly though. There's no other explanation," Sparrowtail pointed out, her brown eyes brimmed with sorrow.

Sparktail let out a low moan. "I just *can't* believe they'd leave; I *won't* ! My own kits! I thought I knew them! There's no way in the name of StarClan that they went to DayClan willingly; there must be something we're missing!"

Rustypelt rested his tail on his mate's shoulder. "We'll have to find out," he growled, and Hailstorm couldn't tell if his growl was aimed at DayClan or at his daughters that appeared to have willingly gone with them.

"DayClan better watch out; if they have somehow managed to take Echoheart and Whispersong..." Hailstorm snarled, trailing off and shaking his head in fear and anger.

"They *will* return," Sparrowtail stated firmly, though doubt filled her eyes. "You'll see."

"Maybe," Sparktail wailed. "But why would they leave in the first place?" Sadness filled her desperate meow and her reddish-brown fur sagged on her shoulders.

Hailstorm stared across the river in agony and hoped that whatever the reason they'd left, they hadn't gone to DayClan willingly, and they'd find their way back home.

Where are you, Echoheart? he asked desperately. But only the wind

in the trees answered his silent call.

Chapter 8

Whispersong padded through the long grass, careful not to step on the new growth of cactus. They were now in the prairie that she, Echoheart, Eveningstar, and Copperleaf had passed through on the way to the Moonfall. The wind blew in the long blades off the dry grassland, while the stars shone weakly from above as the gray light of dawn lit up the sky. The three cats had left DayClan territory just past moonhigh, and now they were nearing Star Mountain, the sacred rocky mountain where the Moonfall cave lay.

Whispersong looked up at the lightening sky. Vultures soared on the wind, circling the prairie from above, looking for their next meal.

Every now and then, Bumblefrost would warn them about hawks and eagles coming, saying that DayClan had seen cats carried away by the vicious creatures, or torn apart by their sharp talons. Every time they heard the loud, ear-splitting cry of the large birds, they'd take shelter underneath a bush, hoping the eagles wouldn't spot them.

Whispersong walked just behind Echoheart. After leaving DayClan territory, Echoheart had insisted she take the lead, shoving Bumblefrost out of the way.

Whispersong's fur brushed Bumblefrost's as they headed over a hill, the grass swaying in the warm breeze, looking like waves on a large lake.

"I'm so hungry!" she heard Echoheart call from up ahead.

Whispersong nodded. Their traveling herbs had worn off, and Bumblefrost had had it worst since he hadn't had any herbs before leaving.

"Let's stop and hunt," Bumblefrost suggested, and Echoheart turned around and glared at him. Bumblefrost flattened his ears.

"Oh, come on, Echoheart! You were just about to suggest it yourself! Don't deny it; you just said you were hungry," Whispersong meowed impatiently.

Echoheart looked like she was about to protest, then sighed. "You're right," she meowed, the breeze ruffling her gray tabby fur, glowing in the strengthening sunlight. "Let's hunt."

Whispersong sighed in relief. She nudged Bumblefrost. "Want to hunt together?" Then she saw her sister, staring at her with annoyance in her eyes. *Why does she have to make it so hard? I hunt with her all the time at home!* "You can hunt with us too," she meowed awkwardly.

Echoheart narrowed her eyes. "No, I'd rather hunt alone." Then she whipped around and disappeared behind a small ravine full of sage bushes.

Whispersong sighed, then turned around, hearing Bumblefrost behind her. She sniffed the air, and suddenly picked up the scent up rabbit. She spotted it hopping along a patch of daisies and sunflowers, nibbling on the plants. Whispersong bolted after it, claws tearing through the grass. She pounced, but it was too fast, and she missed it.

But before it could hide underneath a bush, Bumblefrost burst from the side, chasing it away from the hideout. He sprinted after it, and Whispersong's eyes widened. He leapt, and soon he was on top of it, killing it with a quick bite to the neck. He grabbed it in his mouth, his flanks heaving, and carried it over to Whispersong.

"Wow!" Whispersong exclaimed. "I forgot how fast DayClan cats are!"

"Yeah," he panted with a smile. He dropped the large, dusky brown rabbit at Whispersong's paws. "Let's share it," he suggested.

"Okay," Whispersong purred. Bumblefrost took the first bite, then he pushed it towards Whispersong with a large black paw.
Whispersong bent down and took a large bite of the rabbit. It didn't have the woodland taste with it, like the rabbits in the forest back

home, but the taste of the open air and endless fields of grass. "It's delicious," she purred.

Once they'd finished their meal, Whispersong washed her ears, and Bumblefrost was licking his paws.

"There you are!"

Whispersong jerked her head around as a shape appeared over the hills behind her. It was Echoheart.

"I've been looking all over for you! You should've come back to the spot where we separated. I though I'd lost you!" Echoheart's voice wasn't filled with anger, it was strained with fear, and Whispersong felt a wave of guilt.

"I'm sorry," she muttered, then ran up to her sister and licked her cheek. "Catch anything?"

"A vole," she muttered, still sounding annoyed, then she turned and headed onward towards the mountains, not even waiting to see if Whispersong or Bumblefrost were following her.

Whispersong turned to Bumblefrost, who rolled his eyes and shrugged. Whispersong sighed, then followed her sister across the large grassland once more.

* * *

By the time dusk rolled around, clouds had covered the sky, leaving it completely dark and hard to see without the light of the moon and stars. The breeze was now cold, and Whispersong shivered. Bumblefrost had found an old, abandoned badger set to shelter in, and said he'd take first watch, while Whispersong and Echoheart slept. Echoheart was hesitant at first, but she finally curled up on the dirt floor of the den and closed her eyes. Whispersong laid down beside her sister, and soon she found sleep too.

In the middle of the night, Bumblefrost woke Whispersong, telling her it was her watch. Whispersong yawned, then sat by the entrance to the den, watching the dark gray clouds drift in front of the moon, and then reveal it once more. She stood guard over her two best

friends, watching the grass dance in the wind around the badger set's entrance.

Her mind drifted to home. What had her Clanmates thought when they'd woken up to find that she and Echoheart hadn't returned from their walk? They would have organized a search party for sure and followed their scent-trail to the meadow, where they would have found Bumblefrost's scent. Whispersong hoped that her Clanmates didn't think DayClan had taken them. Would they attack DayClan?

Whispersong shuddered. *What if us leaving starts a deadly war between DayClan and DawnClan?* She shook the thought away.

Soon the sky lightened, and the clouds overhead became light gray. Dawn was on its way. She turned and woke up Bumblefrost and Echoheart, and soon the three were off again.

By sunhigh, the clouds had cleared, and trees started appearing again, sparse at first, but thicker the further the cats walked. They were all pine and spruce trees; no oak, birch, aspen, or cedar, like in DawnClan territory. Whispersong saw the hills up ahead through the treeline, and realized they got steeper and steeper, their dark green slopes leading up to the mountains that were at the end of the foothills. Whispersong heaved herself up the start of the hill and saw the tall, rocky, snow-capped mountains looming ahead, stretching farther than Whispersong could see. Clouds swarmed the peaks, thick and gray.

"Snow clouds," Bumblefrost muttered, watching the clouds roll toward them and over the further foothills. "We'll be hitting snow soon."

Just like Bumblefrost had predicted, the three cats soon found snow covering the ground, deepening with each hill they climbed. The sun still shone weakly in the sky, the snow clouds looming in front of them now. Not long and the shadows would reach them.

Whispersong glanced over her shoulder, feeling regret and longing as they left the warmth of new-leaf behind her and headed back into the leaf-bare in front of her. She could no longer see the forest

were DawnClan territory was, not even the moorland caught her eye. It was all gone, hidden beyond the expanse of the horizon. Her heart ached with homesickness, but she pushed the feeling away. This was only the very beginning of their journey; it'd be a while until they returned.

A cold breeze whipped at her fur and she turned away from the valley behind her and shivered, chills racing through her entire body. "Wow," she panted, her breath billowing out in front of her in small fog-like clouds. "It's cold."

They had to take a break as they climbed higher, the snow deepening and the cold air freezing them to the core. The three cats settled on some large boulders bathed in sunlight. Whispersong flopped over, and unfortunately the weak rays of the sun hardly warmed the cold stone. She shivered again and curled herself tighter beside Echoheart and Bumblefrost.

"It's freezing!" Echoheart shivered, her paws tucked underneath her stomach as they rested on a flat, stone boulder.

Whispersong looked further up the slope, where they'd be heading next. She froze. The trees were blackened and leafless ahead, bent in strange angles, fallen on their sides, and hanging lifeless for as far as she could see up the hill. An eerie silence hovered over it, and nothing stirred.

"Fire," Bumblefrost murmured solemnly, following Whispersong's horrified gaze.

Whispersong widened her eyes. A fire had caused this? She'd heard tales from the elders when she was a kit about the destruction of fire: its greedy flames devouring everything it touched; it's smoke choking anyone and everyone; leaving a blackened, forsaken, ashen land behind.

Whispersong felt a sadness creep up her spine. What was now black was once green; what was now burnt was once lush, what was now dead once supported countless animals.

"Wow," Echoheart breathed, blue eyes shining with sadness.

Bumblefrost nodded. "I saw one when I was an apprentice." He sighed, shoulders sagging with the memory. "I was on my first patrol with Songtail, Heatpool, and Burningwood. We were on the far side of our border, the one that faces the mountains, and smoke was rolling over the foothills. The orange flames clawed into the sky, and the scattered trees and grasses on those hills were on fire, blackening, reduced to nothing more than ash and broken pieces of wood..."

Whispersong watched Bumblefrost as he described the horrific scene, and she pictured what it would be like to see what he'd seen. She shuddered.

"Then Twolegs were there, with long, red monsters and even flying monsters—"

"Twolegs?" Whispersong echoed in anger.

"They stopped the fire." Bumblefrost murmured, as if he wasn't believing his own words.

"What?" Echoheart sputtered in disbelief.

Bumblefrost nodded. "That's about the only good thing any of us in DayClan had ever seen Twolegs do that actually benefited us." He sighed. "The fire was gone, and it was no longer burning, but the hillside was blackened."

"I wonder why a DawnClan patrol didn't see that," Echoheart murmured, looking at Whispersong.

"Bumblefrost was apprenticed before us, and he's many moons older than us," meowed Whispersong. "I bet you a DawnClan patrol did see it, but we were kits; we wouldn't have been involved in the warriors' problems."

"Then how come we've never noticed the burnt hill?" Echoheart asked.

Whispersong blinked and shrugged.

"You can't see it from the river. Your patrol probably just saw the

smoke."

"Oh," Whispersong shuddered, eyes still on the forlorn black forest.

When they finally got going again, trudging through the snow and up the hill toward the burnt forest, Whispersong's heart was sinking lower and lower into her stomach at the burned ruins around her.

What if this happened to DawnClan? One spark, and the whole forest could be ablaze. What would happen to the survivors? Where would they live? What if that happens while we're gone? Whispersong gulped, praying to StarClan that that wouldn't ever happen.

"Come on," Bumblefrost sighed. "The sooner we get out of here the better."

For once, Echoheart didn't argue. Whispersong tried not to think about the fire, looking determinedly ahead of her to the green hills beyond.

As the sun sank into the horizon, they had left the desolate, charred landscape. Whispersong refused to look back. If she pondered too much about fires, she would never be able to sleep; fear of losing her Clanmates and the forest they lived in from a wildfire would haunt her dreams.

Shadows engulfed the pine forest they were in now, turing the snow gray and the trees black. The snowstorm had blown in, making it harder and harder to see, while the temperatures plummeted around them.

They were scouting the land for a place to stay the night, sheltered from the weather. After a while of searching half-blind in the thickening snowfall and biting wind, they found a dead, but thick, raspberry bush. The brittle, brown, and shriveled leaves still clung to the bush's thickly-tangled branches, which blocked out the wind and snow.

Whispersong curled up beside Bumblefrost, while Echoheart took the first watch.

The next morning, they woke up a to whitened world. Unbelievably thick fog hovered around the hills, trapping the cats inside their bush. No more snow came with it, but frost did, covering the trees where the snow hadn't stuck. It clung to the pine needles and blades of grass, causing them to hang with the weight of the thick frost.

Whispersong looked out the dead raspberry bush at the bitter, cold weather and saw a faint light through the treetops above them; Whispersong guessed it was the sun, which meant that it was nearly sunhigh.

Her stomach growled; they hadn't eaten in two days, and even then their meal had been small.

"I'll hunt," Bumblefrost meowed, sitting up.

"No you won't," Whispersong meowed sternly. "It's way too cold, and you can hardly see a few fox-lengths in front of your nose out there!"

"I'll be fine," Bumblefrost murmured determinedly.

"You won't catch anything," Echoheart pointed out, looking at the deep snowdrifts and the gusting wind.

"Yeah," Whispersong agreed. "It's turning into a blizzard."

"Alright, fine," Bumblefrost sighed. "But we don't know how long this storm will last."

"Only StarClan knows," Echoheart muttered, then she laid down and tucked her nose under her tail, her bright blue eyes closing and her flanks rising and falling evenly as she fell asleep.

Bumblefrost sat beside Whispersong, his flank pressed against her own. Whispersong curled up beside him, her legs weary from all the hiking, and soon she fell asleep, Bumblefrost's warm tongue rasping over her ears.

* * *

"Here."

Whispersong opened her eyes to find Echoheart dropping a squirrel at her paws.

"It's for you two to share." Echoheart nodded at Bumblefrost curtly, who was stretching in the corner of the den.

"Thanks," Bumblefrost meowed, yawning. Whispersong was glad that there was no hint of a growl or sarcasm in his voice.

Echoheart nodded curtly, then turned to take a bite of her own catch: a small vole.

Whispersong peered out of the branches of the raspberry bush and saw a clear blue sky, the trees swaying in the breeze, while the frost still clung to their pine needles, thick and white.

Whispersong finished her meal, then padded out of the bush, the brisk wind hitting her face the heartbeat she stepped out. She shivered, but went to sit in the sun, giving herself a quick wash before Echoheart and Bumblefrost came out too.

"Let's go," Echoheart sighed, staring at the vast, rocky expanse of mountains ahead.

Whispersong nodded, then stepped in pace with her sister, hiking up the snowy hill, getting steeper the higher they climbed. The many pine and spruce trees swayed and creaked in the chilly wind, and Whispersong was reminded of leaf-bare and shuddered.

The three walked in silence for a while, the big white clouds sailing through the sky as the wind pushed them forward. The sun was sometimes hidden behind them, casting cold shadows on the forest.

After the long-lasted silence, Whispersong finally caught up with her sister and started to talk to her. "What did Slatefur, Whirlheart, Swampclaw, and Peachfur say about the place we had to find? Wasn't there something about a waterfall?" she asked Echoheart.

"Place you have to find?" Bumblefrost interrupted, reminding Whispersong that he had no idea why they were traveling to the

mountains; he'd only come to protect Whispersong.

"We have to find something in the mountains," Echoheart muttered evasively, giving Whispersong a hard stare that said, *Don't tell him about the prophecy.*

Whispersong nodded reluctantly, promising not to tell Bumblefrost.

"Like what?" Bumblefrost asked.

"We need to find something that'll help the Clans." Echoheart was muttering again, and Whispersong could tell that she was annoyed at Bumblefrost.

"Really?" Bumblefrost asked, trotting up to them.

Whispersong nodded. "Yes; mountain cats that overpower eagles, and—" but she stopped as Echoheart gave her an angry glare.

What? Whispersong thought in annoyance. I'm not saying anything about the prophecy!

"But how would... *mountain* cats help us?" Bumblefrost narrowed his eyes in confusion as he padded into step beside Whispersong.

"We don't know yet," Echoheart meowed stiffly, determinedly looking ahead and not at Bumblefrost.

Whispersong tried to cover up for her sister's rudeness and nodded. "I guess we'll find out when StarClan wishes us to."

Soon they reached the hill's peak, the chilling wind whipping their fur, and making Whispersong's eyes water. She flattened her ears and closed her eyes, and faintly noticed Bumblefrost and Echoheart on either side of her as she squinted against the wind. She flinched as frost flung everywhere, melting in her fur and causing her to shiver. Then the wind nipped her wet fur; Whispersong shivered so violently that her teeth chattered and she nearly bit her tongue.

Once the wind died down, Whispersong opened her eyes, squinting against the sudden light that penetrated her eyes. The sun was sinking behind the mountains ahead, steep and jagged. The clouds

hovering about their peaks glowed bright red and orange, and the sky was yellow. Whispersong gazed over the expanse of hills. The trees were black as they were silhouetted against the bright sunset.

There were only a few more hills to climb, Whispersong realized; then they'd be at the base of the mountains, and they'd be climbing them. She shivered. She could see more of the mountain range behind the closest mountains, and knew they were wide and vast, and their journey seemed even more impossible than it seemed before they left. They could get lost forever in the endless rock and snow.

How will we find the cats StarClan told us to find? she wondered helplessly. She shook her head to clear away the worry; they'd figure it out when the time came. *Hopefully*.

"Look," Bumblefrost meowed, gazing forward at the base of one of the mountains, right where the three of them needed to go. Bright orange lights glowed there, all clumped together. Some moved in straight lines, while others remained stationary. Huge, glowing stone-like structures stuck out of the ground, and many were clumped together, smaller ones surrounding them. They looked like large stone trees from the distance.

"It's a Twolegplace," Bumblefrost muttered, shivering. "We'll have to pass through it."

"Are you mouse-brained?" Echoheart exclaimed. "Do you see all the Thunderpaths? And think about how many Twolegs there'll be!"

"I'm not blind," Bumblefrost retorted. "But it's the only way."

"Maybe it's not," Whispersong murmured, staring at some lights that were separated further apart than the other ones. "That place, over there, looks safer," she meowed over the icy gusts, pointing at the further spread lights. "I bet there won't be as many Thunderpaths, or Twolegs, and it'll be quicker than going all the way around the Twolegplace."

Bumblefrost nodded.

Echoheart exclaimed, "But think about all the creatures we might run into! Horses—"

"Horses are harmless," Bumblefrost interrupted. "As long as you stay away from their feet, they won't harm you."

"Okay," Echoheart meowed stubbornly, and Whispersong knew she didn't want to be outsmarted by the DayClan warrior. "What about the other animals Twolegs keep trapped in the shiny mesh borders?"

"You mean sheep and cows?" Bumblefrost laughed. "All they do is eat. We see some from the moor at home sometimes."

"Fine," Echoheart narrowed her eyes. "We'll go that way. But right now, we need to find shelter," she stammered, teeth chattering and body jerking from the biting, icy air around them.

The three of them started down the hill toward the distant orange lights of the Twolegplace. The daylight faded slowly from the sky, and the clouds turned dark gray. The mountains were now complete silhouettes, and the Twolegplace lights glowed unnaturally bright, making it hard to see anything in the sky. Whispersong looked up; all she saw was the thin sliver of the moon, looking like a claw, and a few of the brightest stars. But she couldn't see some of the stars she usually saw in Silverpelt. How would StarClan watch over them in this unfamiliar territory if they couldn't see them?

"How about this?" Echoheart asked, interrupting Whispersong's thoughts. Echoheart ducked her head underneath a dug-out hollow of a giant spruce tree. "It's really sheltered, and the roots stabilize the walls."

Whispersong nodded at her sister, "Good idea," she purred through shivers.

"I can take first watch," Echoheart meowed. "You look like you're asleep on your paws."

"I am," Whispersong nodded, yawning. She crept into the hollow and flopped over on her side, not caring that there were pine needles underneath her or that she was sleeping on dirt. She was so

exhausted, and her paws ached so much, that she didn't feel anything. She closed her eyes, and soon Bumblefrost laid down beside her, resting his head on her flank. Whispersong purred, and soon she drifted off into sleep.

Chapter 9

Echoheart watched her sister curl up beside Bumblefrost and felt a twinge of jealousy. Echoheart pushed the feeling away; how could she be jealous of Whispersong and Bumblefrost, and the relationship between them, when she had Hailstorm? She shook her head. How could she be jealous of him, a *DayClan* cat, for StarClan's sake?

Echoheart looked through the tree branches outlining the hollow and saw the crescent moon glowing above her head, with a few stars surrounding it. The trees whispered in the breeze, dancing in the night. Echoheart was reminded of the forest back home, and her heart ached with homesickness. What was Hailstorm doing right now?

A thought struck Echoheart. She and Whispersong had told Goldheart and Yellowpaw that they were leaving, but had the medicine cats told the rest of the Clan? Or had they so far kept it a secret? Echoheart knew Yellowpaw didn't do well with keeping secrets, and she would want to blurt it out to any cat who was worried. Goldheart would *have* to tell the Clan eventually; then he'd settle their worries.

Echoheart sighed, staring up at the sky.

If you can hear me, StarClan, please let Goldheart and Yellowpaw know that they need to tell the Clan about where we went. I don't like to make them keep secrets, and... the Clan needs to know we haven't left them for good. She paused, closing her eyes with sorrow. *I still love them; please let them know that. I couldn't live with myself if Hailstorm, my parents, or any other cat, thought I didn't care about them anymore. I think about them every heartbeat, miss them with every breath I take. My heart feels numb every time we take a pawstep further from the*

forest, further from the ones I love. Please, StarClan, please... tell them...

She blinked slowly and flattened her ears in sadness. She listened to the wind in the trees, and the distant humming of the Thunderpaths and the Twolegplace.

Soon she felt herself curling up toward the ground, but she didn't try and lift herself up. She was so tired, and the ground looked suddenly so comfy.

A few heartbeats of rest can't hurt, Echoheart thought, closing her eyes.

"Echoheart!"

Echoheart opened her eyes in alarm. She'd fallen asleep, while she was supposed to be keeping watch!

"Echoheart!" It was Whispersong, and she was running toward the hollow, fear in her eyes. What was she doing outside their makeshift shelter? And where was Bumblefrost?

"Get up! GET UP!" Whispersong yowled.

"What's going on?"

"Just get out!" Whispersong growled, shoving Echoheart out of the den. Echoheart stumbled and fell into the snow, but Whispersong didn't pause to check if she was okay; she was racing away down the hill so fast that Echoheart had to jump through the snow in giant strides instead of running. They flew down the tree-filled, snow-covered hill, flinging snow and loose pebbles into the air.

What was so urgent?

Echoheart's chest heaved as her breath ran short, and her muscles screamed. Her heart throbbed in worry, fear, and exhaustion.

What was going on? Why was Whispersong so scared?

Echoheart leapt over a log, spraying snow up like water as she landed. Her breath billowed thickly from her mouth like fog, her

lungs screaming as she inhaled the ice-cold air.

Suddenly Whispersong skidded to a halt at the edge of a tall wall of stone, bigger than the one in the DawnClan camp. Echoheart unsheathed her claws and stopped as well, nearly losing her balance. Snow flew over the edge in a huge clouds as both cats halted abruptly.

Echoheart hunched over and panted, and she felt as if she was going to throw up from that sprint. Her flanks heaved, but she managed to get out, "What... what in the... name of StarClan... was that... all about?"

Whispersong didn't seem to hear her. She was looking around wildly for a way down the cliff. Echoheart jerked her head as a chorus of growls filled the air. Echoheart gazed at the bottom of the hollow for the first time and saw two foxes circling a large gorse bush just at the base of the stone wall. Then a low growl came from the bush; a cat's growl.

Then it struck Echoheart. Bumblefrost was inside the bush.

"We've got to get down there!" Whispersong yowled. Echoheart nodded urgently. Even though Bumblefrost was a DayClan cat, she wouldn't let him be torn apart by the foxes. They had to help him.

A sharp bark sounded behind Echoheart and she whipped her head around; another fox was at the top of the hill behind them, its dark red eyes narrowed angrily and its thick bushy tail lashing. It drew back its lips in a snarl, revealing its sharp fangs, then charged.

Echoheart turned to Whispersong. "Run!" she shrieked, her fur rising in fear. She raced to the left, her paws slipping in the snow. Not a heartbeat later, Echoheart noticed that no one was behind her. She turned around and saw Whispersong, staring at the bottom of the wall. "Whispersong! Move!" she yowled as the fox closed in.

But Whispersong didn't hear her.

Echoheart sprang just as the fox jumped for Whispersong. Echoheart leapt at it, claws unsheathed and teeth bared. She knocked it aside,

and briefly saw Whisersong cowered in fear before Echoheart was lost in a mass of red fur. She bit and clawed, but the fox retaliated. They rolled on top of each other, biting and clawing and hissing, until she finally got free. She turned to face the fox again, but barely stood for a heartbeat before she was tossed aside again. She rolled in the snow, down the hill, and towards the cliff. Echoheart scrambled to her paws, but the fox was already in top of her, driving her toward the sheer drop-off.

Echoheart looked around frantically. Where was Whispersong? Just as Echoheart spotted her, staring at Echoheart wide-eyed, the fox slammed its claws on her back, and she collapsed under the weight and pain. She growled in agony, and felt the cold air sting her cut and blood run down her side. She quickly scrambled to her feet and dodged to the right, narrowly avoiding a claw-swipe to the face.

She backed away, hissing and spitting. But the fox closed in. Echoheart's back paws slipped. She whipped her head around in fear and saw loose pebbles flinging down the cliff as her paws dislodged them. She turned and faced the fox, eyes widened in terror. She took another pawstep backwards and felt her paw meet empty air. She slipped, claws wrenching into the stone as she tried to pull herself upwards. Echoheart clawed furiously, hanging over the cliff. The fox was racing toward her, and Echoheart screeched at Whispersong desperately. "Help!"

But Whispersong was frozen in fear, her brown eyes as round as the moon.

Echoheart's paws suddenly slipped. Time seemed to slow down. Her eyes flew open wildly. Whispersong was running along the edge of the cliff, leaping down the ledges. The fox stopped at the edge of the cliff, spraying snow and pebbles into the air. The stone wall was growing higher above her head, and the ground was growing larger beneath her. She rotated in the air, her paws ready for impact.

Echoheart slammed into stone. She let out a yowl. She'd landed on one of the stone ledges, barely big enough for her. Echoheart stood up, but dizziness engulfed her and she felt herself falling over. Suddenly Echoheart felt a hard tug on her neck. She screeched in pain, and her eyes flew open.

Echoheart turned around. Whispersong was standing on the ledge, holding Echoheart from the scruff of the neck. Her claws were digging into the gray stone, but she was sliding. They were still several fox-lengths above the ground, where the other two foxes were waiting below. Echoheart heard Whispersong whimper in terror through a mouth full of Echoheart's fur, but she heaved, and soon Echoheart's claws found a grip beside her sister. Before Echoheart could say anything her, Whispersong leapt down onto another ledge, then sprang to the ground, landing on top of a fox, which barked in surprise. Echoheart raced to her sister's help, launching herself at the other one.

Suddenly Echoheart was pulled from behind, and she lost her balance, yowling out in pain. She whipped her head around. The third fox, the one that they'd first met at the top of the cliff, was dragging Echoheart by her tail. Echoheart growled in pain and anger, thrashing in its grip.

It must have jumped down to help the other two! she thought in fear.

She turned and lashed out at it, raking her claws across its white muzzle. It howled, releasing her tail. She turned to get to her paws, but another fox snapped out at her ear, tearing it. Echoheart hissed, then leapt into the air, landing on the fox's flank. She clawed at it, then sunk her teeth in deep, tasting the blood on her tongue. She felt satisfaction in her bloodied claws as the fox knocked her off and fled down the hill and into the bushes.

Echoheart heard another hiss and spun around, heart thumping. Bumblefrost had joined Whispersong's side and was helping her fight one of the foxes, which was more than twice their size. Echoheart started to go and help them, but her face hit the snow hard, stinging her torn ear. She was being dragged down again by the second fox, which had suddenly come from behind the bushes and leapt at her. Echoheart, now exhausted and weak, missed when she clawed for its eyes. It bared its teeth mockingly and cornered her against the stone wall. Echoheart looked around wildly for a way to escape, but she was trapped.

"Echoheart!" Whispersong screamed from what seemed to be forests away. Echoheart could just see her sister from behind the fox, her

eyes stretched wide in terror. Then Whispersong was dragged down, the first fox on top of her. Echoheart heard her sister's howls of pain, and horror raced down Echoheart's spine; there was nothing she could do to help her. Bumblefrost was desperately trying to help, but the fox kept knocking him the to ground, and this time Bumblefrost hit a rock and shuddered, then lie still.

Bumblefrost can't be dead! Echoheart told herself, ignoring the fox closing in around her, growling ominously.

Then a caterwaul of absolute terror suddenly filled the air, ringing in Echoheart's ears and chilling her heart. There was another shriek, and Echoheart could see her sister's dark crimson blood staining the snow.

Whispersong! She's going to die!

Then Echoheart shook her head. *No!* she thought. She would *not* let her sister get torn up by a fox! She couldn't let that happen!

The fox in front of Echoheart snapped, barely missing her nose, and Echoheart felt a sudden burst of energy. She lashed at the fox, feeling her claws dig deep into flesh. Its blood splattered the snow and her mottled gray tabby fur. The fox tripped, and Echoheart took that chance to race to her sister's help.

But just as she was leaping over the fox, it sat up and grabbed her, locking its jaws on her hind leg. Echoheart collapsed, and fell limp, her leg numb. She clawed the fox's nose, and it released her leg with a yowl of pain, cowering toward the bushes. She stared at her limp leg, gushing blood. But when Echoheart tried to move it, nothing happened. Echoheart's breathing quickened, and she started to panic.

Whispersong and Bumblefrost's screams filled the air as the fox they were fighting covered them in blood. She detected a glint of satisfaction in its evil eyes, and Echoheart's blood turned to ice. They were all going to die!

StarClan, let it be painless! Take me quickly!

Suddenly the fox lying in front of her started to stir, and it stood up. It glanced at Echoheart, saw that she was wounded, and lashed its tail in mocking. Then it reared on its hind legs, aiming for the killing blow. Echoheart closed her eyes, repeating her previous pleas to StarClan in her head.

"No!" The scream was Whispersong's, and Echoheart barely registered it. She cowered down, prepared to feel the sting of death.

Then a loud gurgling sound forced her to open her eyes. To her surprise, the fox was lying on the ground again, blood gushing from its throat and mouth, which stained the snow around it. Its legs twitched, then it lay still, eyes rolled back in death. She looked up.

Bumblefrost was standing over it, eyes blazing and sides heaving.

Echoheart stared wide-eyed at the DayClan warrior, his fur and claws stained with blood. He'd just saved her life.

Whispersong raced over to where Echoheart was lying; her fur was soaked with blood but her eyes were bright with relief. "Thank StarClan you're alright! Thank StarClan we're *all* alright!" she gasped, covering Echoheart in vigorous licks.

"Th-Thanks, Bumblefrost," Echoheart stammered, still shocked.

Bumblefrost nodded, panting, but said nothing.

"We need to get you some herbs," Whispersong breathed. "We all need herbs. Can you walk, Echoheart?"

"No." Echoheart gritted her teeth as she tried to stretch her stiff leg. "I think... I think it's broken."

"Ohh," sighed Whispersong, pacing. "What did Yellowpaw and Goldheart use for mending broken bones?" She stared at the ground, and her eyes were narrowed. "Do you remember anything?" she meowed, turning to Bumblefrost. "Did you ever hear Lilyfoot or Fernpaw saying anything about that?"

Bumblefrost shook his head despairingly.

Echoheart clamped her jaws shut as a wave of pain pulsed from her leg. She let out a quiet moan, eyes squeezed tight.

Whispersong stared at the ground in thought. Then she sat up, her eyes bright. "Comfrey!" she meowed loudly. "Comfrey helps heal broken bones!"

"How on earth do you remember that?" Bumblefrost panted.

Whispersong narrowed her eyes in confusion. "I... I don't know, actually." Then she shook her head. "We need to find comfrey. Oh, and Bumblefrost, find cobwebs for all of us."

Bumblefrost nodded, then trudged down the hill with blood still covering his fur.

"Where are you going to find comfrey in this weather?" Echoheart asked. "The ground is covered in snow; everything will be frozen."

"We can't give up." Whispersong looked at Echoheart and meowed determinedly, "We'll heal you, I promise. I just don't know how yet."

Echoheart nodded, and another jolt of pain shot through her leg.

"How'd it break?" Whispersong asked, looking solemnly at Echoheart.

"That fox," she grunted bitterly, pointing at the dead fox lying on the ground in front of her. "It bit my leg and the bones crunched." She gritted her teeth in pain.

Just then Bumblefrost came running toward them, carrying a bundle of cobwebs in his jaws. He dropped them at Whispersong's paws.

"Thanks," Whispersong meowed gratefully, rubbing her muzzle against his. Then she grabbed the cobwebs and pressed them against Echoheart's bleeding leg. Echoheart winced, then relaxed.

Whispersong lifted the webs then ran her paws along Echoheart's leg. She looked up at Echoheart, surprised and happy. "It's not broken."

"What?" Echoheart gasped. "But—"

"It's just been dislocated," Whispersong meowed cheerfully.

"But she still can't walk," Bumblefrost pointed out. "How is a dislocated leg better than a broken leg? Either way we're stuck here." Echoheart silently agreed with him.

"No we're not," Whispersong meowed. "You can put the bones back in place, then she'll be able to walk again."

"Really?" Bumblefrost meowed, his eyes shining at Whispersong. "Do you know how?"

"I-I think so," she murmured. Then she stepped forward. "Okay," she told Echoheart. "This is going to hurt. Bumblefrost," she ordered, turning to the DayClan warrior. "Find a stick she can bite down on."

Bumblefrost nodded, then walked to the base of a pine tree, grabbing a large twig in his jaws, and carried it back to Whispersong.

"Thanks. Here, Echoheart," Whispersong meowed. "Bite down on this."

Echoheart obeyed, her paws shaking nervously. Echoheart closed her eyes as Whispersong grabbed her leg, then pulled. Echoheart bit hard on the stick as a sharp jolt shot up her leg. Echoheart's eyes started to water, the pain coming in waves.

Soon it was over and Echoheart opened her eyes. Whispersong stepped back. "There," she meowed triumphantly.

Echoheart flexed her leg, and felt excitement pulsing through her as it moved, without pain. "Oh thank you!" she purred to her sister. "How do you remember that?"

"I don't know," Whispersong shrugged.

"Any cat who didn't know you would think you were a medicine cat," Bumblefrost meowed quietly.

"Well, I'm glad you knew what to do," Echoheart purred, standing up. She put weight on her leg and felt a small jolt of pain, but other than that, it was healed. Echoheart smiled.

"Let's find a sheltered place to clean up and treat the rest of our wounds," Bumblefrost meowed, licking the dried blood on his shoulder.

Whispersong nodded.

"What about that hollow?" Echoheart asked.

"That's quite a ways uphill," Whispersong murmured. "And plus we need to keep heading toward the mountains, that'd waste time."

Bumblefrost nodded. "Let's go. There's bound to be *something* we can shelter in."

Echoheart limped after her sister and Bumblefrost, glancing one last time at the two dead foxes lying limply on the frozen ground.

Thank you, StarClan, for saving me, and for saving Whispersong and Bumblefrost as well. Please continue to watch over us as we journey further from your boundaries; we'll need you.

She took a deep breath then turned and limped down the hill beside Whispersong and Bumblefrost, the snow melting in her pelt from the fox battle and chilling her to the core. She shivered, glad that there wasn't any wind today, or they'd be even colder and more miserable.

At the base of the hill, Bumblefrost spotted a small, abandoned Twoleg den, with holes in the roof and frozen ivy growing all around it. He peered inside. "Looks safe." He sniffed the air. "No one lives here."

Echoheart sighed in relief and pushed inside the den, finding a patch of grass growing in the corner. She curled up and rested her chin on her paws. Whispersong sat next to Bumblefrost, pressing the cobwebs he'd collected to his still wet wound. They sat cleaning each other's wounds, while Echoheart lazily licked her own cuts, her eyelids heavy with exhaustion.

Echoheart yawned, laying back down, then blinked, watching the clouds drift over the mountains in the distance. Soon, the three of them would be traveling there, up the steep, rocky surfaces and through the cold snow and ice. Echoheart shivered. They needed StarClan more than ever.

* * *

Echoheart opened her eyes. The sky was gray with the light of dawn and the breeze blew in the trees, while birds fluttered about the branches and on top of the abandoned Twoleg den they were in.

She stood up, then flopped over as her leg, stiff from lying on it all night, caused her to collapse.

"How are you feeling?" Whispersong asked, licking her paws beside Bumblefrost.

"Alright," Echoheart meowed. "Just stiff."

"You need to exercise it then," Whispersong suggested.

Echoheart flexed her leg, in and out, until the feeling crept back into her leg. She stood up, then put her weight on it, and was relieved that she didn't collapse again.

"I caught this," Bumblefrost meowed, dropping a sparrow at Echoheart's feet. "Whispersong and I already ate."

Echoheart was about to retort that she could catch her own food, but thought better of it, and nodded gratefully at the DayClan warrior. After all, he had saved her life yesterday. She'd never, ever, forget that. She looked down at the sparrow and devoured it in a few hungry bites, then sat up, licking her lips.

"When should we go?" Whispersong asked.

"Aren't we heading into Twolegplace today?" Echoheart shuddered worriedly. It'd be hard to cross Thunderpaths and avoid Twolegs with a stiff and not-so-useful leg.

"You'll be fine," Whispersong murmured, seeing her fear. "Besides,

we'll be walking through the place with less Twoleg dens and more grass."

Bumblefrost nodded. "It won't be too bad."

"And what if we run into dogs? Or more foxes? Or even more cats?" Echoheart asked.

"We'll deal with it when the time comes," Whispersong meowed, flicking her tail.

Echoheart nodded, sighing, then got shakily to her paws. Once she'd found her balance, she followed Bumblefrost and Whispersong out of the abandoned Twoleg den, and down the rest of the hill. At its base, there were less trees, and more open grassland. Bumblefrost closed his eyes and took a deep, relaxed breath. Echoheart knew he was reminded of his home on the moorland, but Echoheart didn't like it. She felt too exposed.

Soon they came to a long line of wired mesh, stinking of Twolegs. "What *is* it?" Whispersong asked.

"A Twoleg territory marker," Bumblefrost meowed, eyes following the mesh line down to the left and right; it went as far as they could see. "Twolegs use it to mark their territory. And they sometimes keep animals like horses and sheep in them."

"Oh," Whispersong meowed, staring at the mesh. "Is it safe inside?"

"Probably," Bumblefrost shrugged. "I don't see anything right now. But don't worry, Twolegs don't keep foxes or badgers in here."

"Good," Echoheart sighed in relief.

Bumblefrost stepped through the mesh, careful not to touch it. Whispersong followed, and Echoheart came after that. She lowered herself to the ground and squeezed under the mesh, and soon she was on the other side. She shook off the dirt, then looked ahead. The green grass waved in the breeze, and the four cats walked through it, feeling the soft blades rub against their legs. Birds sang above their heads, and thankfully they weren't eagles or hawks.

A loud bleating sound come from Echoheart's left, and she turned abruptly. She saw large white animals with a dark face and legs; they looked like clouds with legs.

"Those are sheep," Bumblefrost meowed, knowing one of them would ask.

"Do they hunt?" Echoheart asked worriedly.

"No. They eat the grass."

Then suddenly a loud barking came from behind the mass of sheep, and soon the fluffy white animals were running, right toward them. A large gray and white dog burst through, driving them forward.

"Run!" Bumblefrost yowled.

"I thought you said they don't hunt!" Whispersong yowled, racing after the DayClan warrior.

Echoheart ignored her stiff leg and sprinted after the two, heart pounding in terror.

"They don't!" he called over his shoulder. "But they can run you over with their giant feet! And the dog isn't helping much!"

The ground was shaking. The barking grew louder. The stampede was right on their tails. The sheep's bleating cries echoed around them, and soon the three cats were surrounded by the herd of sheep, running beside them. Echoheart gasped and pushed harder after Bumblefrost and Whispersong.

StarClan help us!

"We'll be squashed!" Whispersong yowled.

"Quick! Over here!" a voice called urgently.

Echoheart didn't know where the voice was coming from, nor did she care. She was not going to be trampled on! She glanced at Whispersong and Bumblefrost, who were right on her heels, and they raced toward a large red Twoleg den where the voice had

come from. They cut across the stampede, leaping out of the way and narrowly missing all the sheeps' giant feet.

Echoheart burst through the den entrance, and skidded to a halt, panting. She watched the sheep race past outside the den, the fluffy gray and white dog chasing after them.

When they'd gone, Echoheart looked around the dark den. It was full of giant square-like piles of dead grass, and many things hung on the wall.

"What *is* this place?" Whispersong panted.

"It's a barn."

Echoheart turned to Bumblefrost, wondering how he knew this, but the DayClan warrior was looking around in confusion.

If he didn't say that, then who did?

Echoheart turned her head as movement caught her eye. A black- and white-patched she-cat stepped forward from the other side of the den's entrance, with a light orange tabby tom behind her.

"Were you the one who saved us?" Whispersong asked.

The she-cat nodded, smelling the air around them to get their scent.

"Thank you so much," Echoheart panted, dipping her head to the two cats.

"Do you live here?" Bumblefrost asked. "Where are your Twolegs?"

"Twolegs?"

"The things that live in this den," Echoheart meowed, looking around the red den.

"Oh, house-folk. We don't live *with* them," the tom meowed stiffly.

House-folk? Is that what they call Twolegs around here?

"We live in their barn and catch their mice. We don't bother them

and they don't bother us," the she-cat explained in a more friendly tone.

Echoheart and Whispersong exchanged a confused glance.

"What are you doing here?" the black- and white-patched she-cat asked.

"We're passing through," Bumblefrost meowed.

"Yes, we're heading for the mountains," Whispersong nodded.

"Why?" the orange tom asked. "That's fuzz-minded. It's dangerous up there."

"But we have to," Echoheart meowed. "We were sent on a mission."

"By whom?" the she-cat asked in surprise.

"Our Clans, I mean, the other cats we live with," Echoheart lied; explaining StarClan would take too long for these loners.

"And who do you live with?"

"Not anyone you would know. It's *days*, many days away from here, past these hills and across the large grasslands," Whispersong meowed.

The two loners exchanged awed glances.

"So, what are your names?" Echoheart asked the them.

"I'm Magpie," the black- and white-patched she-cat meowed.

"And I'm her mate, Rye," the orange tom murmured.

Echoheart nodded. "I'm Echoheart, and this is my sister, Whispersong." Whispersong dipped her head.

"And I'm Bumblefrost," Bumblefrost meowed.

"Strange names," Magpie murmured, then shrugged. "We need to heal up that leg of yours, Echosomething... Sorry, I forgot your

name."

"It's alright," Echoheart murmured. "Do you know how to?"

"Yes," Rye meowed. Then he trotted out the barn, Magpie behind him.

Whispersong looked at Echoheart.

Moments later, Rye came back with dark leaves in his jaws, and Magpie had a lighter green leaf.

"Comfrey! And dock!" Whispersong exclaimed.

"You know of healing?" Magpie asked Whispersong.

"Not really, I just remember the herbs."

"This leaf," Rye nodded at the dark green leaf. "Will help mend broken and sprained bones and help them heal properly. And this lighter leaf will help cure all your scratches."

"What on earth did you get in a fight with?" Magpie asked while Rye chewed the leaves.

"Three foxes," Bumblefrost muttered.

"Foxes!" gasped Magpie. "What were you thinking going near those beasts?"

"We didn't do it on purpose," Bumblefrost retorted in annoyance.

"Where did Rye learn how to do this?" Whispersong asked Magpie, and Echoheart knew she was trying to distract them from Bumblefrost's open hostility.

The black and white she-cat shrugged. "He'd known when I first met him."

Echoheart winced as Rye pushed the leaves on her cuts. "Here," he meowed when he was done. "Eat these." Echoheart stared at the leaves on the ground. These were comfrey, Echoheart remembered,

and they'd help fix her leg. Echoheart bent over and chewed them up, trying to ignore their bitter taste. She looked up at Rye when she finished, who was pressing the dock leaves to all of Whispersong and Bumblefrost's wounds.

"Thank you," Echoheart meowed. "Again."

Rye dipped his head. "You can spend the night here if you want," he offered.

"Thanks, but I think we have to continue on," Whispersong meowed.

"We'll think about it," Echoheart nodded.

Rye and Magpie dipped their heads, then backed away, leaping up the piles of dead grass and onto a ledge at the top of the barn, where they disappeared.

Echoheart turned to Whispersong and asked, "Isn't it sunhigh?"

Whispersong peered outside of the barn. "It's just past sunhigh."

"We could still cover a lot more ground today," Bumblefrost meowed. "We'd waste time staying here the rest of the day."

"I know," Whispersong sighed.

"I think we should continue on," Echoheart meowed. "Hey, Rye? Magpie?" she called.

Rye and Magpie peeked over their ledge, looking down at the three warrior cats. "What is it?" Rye asked worriedly.

"Nothing's wrong," Whispersong assured the two loners. "We just think we should continue on our journey. Thank you so much for saving us, and giving us the herbs." She dipped her silver tabby head.

"Very well," meowed Rye, leaping down the piles of dead grass. "We'll walk with you to the edge of our territory."

"Thanks," Echoheart meowed, dipping her head again. The five left

the barn, Rye in the lead, with Bumblefrost and Whispersong behind him, and Echoheart walking beside Magpie.

"Are you going to be passing through the city?" Magpie asked Echoheart.

"City?" Echoheart twitched her ears in confusion.

"Where the Twolegs, as you call them, live," she answered, pointing with her nose at the clump of tall Twoleg dens and Thunderpaths.

"Oh, the Twolegplace," Echoheart nodded. "Yes, we are."

"Well, it can be dangerous," Magpie warned.

"I know," Echoheart sighed, her stomach clenching in nervousness.

"I know some cats who can help you through it," Magpie meowed.

"Really? Are they...friendly?" she asked warily.

"Oh, yes," Magpie purred in laughter. Then she raised her voice. "Rye! Let's take them to River's place!"

Rye turned and nodded.

Whispersong and Bumblefrost fell back to walk with Echoheart, while Magpie caught up with her mate. "Why are they taking us to a river?" Whispersong asked in confusion.

"I think 'River' is a cat. That's what it sounded like," Echoheart replied.

"Well, who is this cat then?" Bumblefrost muttered.

"Apparently he, or she, can help us through the Twolegplace," Echoheart shrugged.

"Should we trust them?" Bumblefrost asked, nodding at Rye and Magpie ahead of them.

"They did rescue us, and treat our wounds," Whispersong pointed out.

"I guess," Bumblefrost murmured.

Soon the five cats reached the other mesh, and Echoheart saw the Twolegplace up ahead.

Once at the base of a tall red-stone Twoleg den, Rye called, "River? Pansy? Hazel?"

A dark gray tom stepped out from the den, with a light brown tabby she-cat and a gray-brown she-cat behind him.

"Oh, hello, Rye, Magpie," the gray tom flicked his tail in greeting. Then he stopped, spotting Whispersong, Echoheart, and Bumblefrost. "Who are these cats?"

"This is..." Magpie started, then closed her mouth. "I'm sorry, I still don't remember your names," she murmured uncomfortably.

"It's okay," Whispersong assured the black and white she-cat. She stepped forward to the three kittypets. "I'm Whispersong, and this is Echoheart and Bumblefrost."

The dark gray tom looked them all over, and, after a long pause, muttered, "You're not housecats." It wasn't a question.

"No, we're not," Bumblefrost meowed bitterly.

"They're passing through," Magpie told the kittypets. "And they were wondering if you could show them through the city."

The dark gray tom blinked in thought, his tail flicking, and Echoheart could tell he was wary and unsure.

"Oh, sure we can," the gray-brown tabby she-cat meowed to him. "It'd be good to stretch our legs again. Remember the adventures we used to go on? It can be like that again."

"Our house-folk won't be here to worry about us either," the light brown tabby she-cat pointed out.

The gray tom blinked slowly. He glanced at the other two kittypets, then turned back to the Clan cats. "I guess so," he finally meowed.

Magpie's tail curled up in pleasure. "I knew you'd agree."

"Thank you," Whispersong meowed next to Echoheart.

"It was nice to visit you, River, and you too, Pansy and Hazel, but we have to get back to our barn; we don't want to keep you waiting in the morning for us," Magpie purred. Then she turned to the Clan cats. "It was nice meeting you, even if it was short."

Echoheart smiled. "You too. Thanks for bringing us here."

Rye dipped his head. "No problem."

"Safe travels," Magpie meowed, getting to her paws.

"Thank you," Whispersong nodded.

"On your way back, if you need some place to stay, you're welcome any time," Magpie offered kindly.

Echoheart nodded. "We appreciate it," she meowed, dipping her head.

"We'll be leaving then," Rye meowed. Then he dipped his head to the dark gray tom. "I hope to see you again soon."

River nodded. "Same to you."

With that, Rye and Magpie turned and disappeared into the tall grass, heading away from the setting sun.

"Do you live here?" Whispersong asked, turning Echoheart's attention away from Magpie and Rye. "With Twolegs... I mean, house-folk?"

"Yes," nodded the gay-brown she-cat. "But our house-folk have left somewhere and we're here all by ourselves right now."

"How do you get your food?" Bumblefrost asked. "Don't the Twolegs give you that stuff that looks like rabbit droppings?"

The gray tom's fur bristled. "We're not useless, you know. We can

catch our *own* food."

"Sorry. He didn't know," Whispersong meowed for Bumblefrost, and Bumblefrost cast a quick glance at her, his eyes narrowed.

The tom nodded curtly.

"So," Whispersong continued. "What are your names?"

"I'm Hazel," the gray-brown she-cat murmured.

"I'm Pansy," purred the light brown tabby she-cat.

"River," muttered the dark gray tom.

"We're all siblings," Pansy meowed.

There was a pause.

"Why don't we leave tomorrow morning? The sun will set very soon, so there's no point in leaving today," Hazel nodded at the sun sinking behind the mountains.

"Yes, tomorrow at dawn," River muttered, then turned back into the Twoleg den without another word.

"Don't worry about him," Hazel meowed. "He'll be in a good mood tomorrow. Now, let's show you a place to sleep."

"Follow us," Pansy meowed, and she lead the way with Hazel behind her.

Whispersong nodded and followed. Echoheart walked after her sister, and Bumblefrost was right behind her.

"There's some places inside the den," Hazel purred. "They're super soft."

"*Inside* ?" Bumblefrost echoed, stopping in his tracks. He narrowed his eyes. "We're *warriors*. We don't go inside *Twoleg* dens."

"Suit yourselves then," murmured Pansy, looking hurt, and disappearing inside the den.

"You can sleep under those bushes over there then," Hazel suggested, wrinkling her nose as if she thought sleeping in the bushes was utterly revolting.

I guess she'll never understand, Echoheart thought, *because she's a kittypet.*

"I'm going to go inside then. I'll see you tomorrow," Hazel murmured, trotting away.

Echoheart nodded and walked over to the patch of bushes, a sweet smell hovering around them. Small yellow and white flowers hung from their long green vines. She yawned and curled up under the sweet-smelling bush, watching the sunset fade from the sky. Whispersong laid down beside her, and she saw Bumblefrost on Whispersong's other side.

Echoheart smiled and closed her eyes, falling into a deep, peaceful sleep.

Chapter 10

Hailstorm padded across the camp, Clovertail right behind him. Over the past few days, the fresh-kill pile had grown larger and larger, and the whole Clan was well fed every day.

Hailstorm sat down and grabbed a mouse, while Clovertail picked a vole.

"Don't you love this weather?" his sister asked.

Hailstorm nodded. "I just wish Echoheart were here."

"I know," Clovertail murmured, sighing. "She and Whispersong will come back. I know it."

Hailstorm nodded absently, then he took a bite of the mouse.

"Hailstorm?" Hailstorm turned around at his name and saw Twigfoot padding over to him. "Can you join my hunting patrol?"

"Sure," Hailstorm nodded.

"Am I going?" Clovertail asked.

Twigfoot shook his head. "You're going to help Raypaw collect fresh moss for the nursery."

"Oh, okay," Clovertail sighed, clearly disappointed. "But that's an apprentice's job," she muttered.

"And how many apprentices do we have?" Twigfoot asked sternly.

"One, I know, I know," Clovertail meowed.

"Just until Aspenleaf's kits become apprentices, we need more warriors doing apprentice duties. If it makes you feel better,

Clovertail, I'm having Sparrowtail and Sunfur collect moss for the elders and Meadowheart and Prairiefoot for the warriors' den."

Clovertail nodded, padding across the clearing to Raypaw, who was sitting beside Bronzepelt.

"Come on, Hailstorm," Twigfoot meowed. "We're leaving."

"Who else is coming?" Hailstorm asked, trotting beside his father.

"Creekfall and Sparktail."

"Oh," Hailstorm meowed, suddenly thinking of Echoheart, and how she'd promised to go hunting with him, then never returned from her walk that night. Hailstorm sighed.

They met Sparktail and Creekfall by the bramble barrier, where Creekfall was trying to tell Pinekit and Needlekit that they weren't going hunting with him.

"But Father!" Needlekit complained. "Raypaw taught us how to hunt!"

"Oh, did he now?" Creekfall asked incredulously.

"Yes!" Pinekit nodded. "He did!"

"Well, I'm sorry; you still can't come. Now go find Rosekit."

"Rosekit is always looking at Sagetail's kits! She never wants to play!" Pinekit complained.

"Well ask her," Creekfall meowed, sounding annoyed.

"Fine," Pinekit meowed stiffly. "Let's go, Needlekit. We don't want to hunt with them anyway."

"We don't?" Needlekit asked his brother, following him in confusion across the clearing and toward the nursery.

"Kits," sighed Creekfall, shaking his head.

Twigfoot twitched his whiskers in amusement, then meowed, "Let's

go."

Twigfoot took the lead, Creekfall and Sparktail right behind him. Hailstorm stayed at the back, listening to the wind in the trees. Clouds hovered by the Pointed Mountain in the distance, gray and dark; they seemed to be rolling in toward the forest, and Hailstorm hoped they weren't snow clouds.

Suddenly Hailstorm spotted movement to his left. He stopped, his ears swiveling. Then he saw it. A robin was hopping across a log, looking for food. Hailstorm licked his lips, then stalked forward and sprang. The bird let out a cry of alarm, but Hailstorm soon silenced it.

"Nice catch, Hailstorm!" Sparktail purred.

Hailstorm smiled, then buried the robin by the log it'd been standing on.

He followed his Clanmates through the forest once more, the sunlight brightening his mood, even if it was just by a little.

* * *

By the time the four had returned to camp, prey filling their jaws, Clovertail and Raypaw had returned from the stream after collecting moss for the nursery. It was sunhigh, and the Clan was gathered in the clearing, sharing tongues and talking. Thick, fluffy white clouds scattered the sky, merging and blotting out the warm new-leaf sun.

There might be rain on its way, Hailstorm thought. *Better than snow.*

Hailstorm sighed and glanced around him. Rosekit, Needlekit, and Pinekit were chasing each other in the clearing, squealing in excitement. Rustypelt sat beside Twilightfoot and Eveningstar, while Copperleaf and Spruceclaw lay spread out on the sunning-stones, basking in the scattered patches new-leaf sun. Hailstorm saw Yellowpaw across the clearing, whispering something to her mentor. Goldheart nodded at her, then together they headed over to Eveningstar, who cocked his head in confusion. The DawnClan

leader dipped his head to Rustypelt and Twilightfoot then he and the medicine cats disappeared into the leader's den.

What was that all about? Hailstorm wondered.

His thoughts were interrupted by Aspenleaf's three kits, racing toward him. "Hailstorm?" Pinekit asked, amber eyes shining. "Will you be my mentor?"

"No!" Needlekit protested. "He'll be my mentor!"

"Well I'm going to have Sunfur as my mentor," Rosekit meowed importantly, shoving past her brothers with her fluffy cream-colored tail twitching and pink nose high in the air.

"Woah," Hailstorm laughed. "Eveningstar is the one to choose who your mentors will be."

"I know," Rosekit nodded. "But I think I'll get Sunfur. Mother said that she's already had an apprentice, so she's more experienced." Rosekit stuck her chest out proudly. "And she's a brave and loyal warrior."

Hailstorm laughed at the she-kit's excited stubbornness. "Well, if Eveningstar doesn't choose one the older warriors, you might get a younger warrior to mentor you. He's got to give the younger warriors apprentices sometime."

"Like, maybe Eaglefeather?" Needlekit asked brightly.

"Maybe," Hailstorm meowed. "But there's also Sparrowtail, Whispersong, and... Echoheart," He pointed out, then sighed. "But Echoheart and Whispersong are gone."

"Gone?" Rosekit tipped her head to one side.

"They disappeared over a quarter-moon ago," Hailstorm murmured.

"Weren't they older than you?" Pinekit asked.

"Yes," Hailstorm replied quietly.

"I think I remember them!" Rosekit squealed. "They were nice."

"Yes," Hailstorm smiled sadly.

"But since they're not here, who will mentor the last one of us?" Pinekit persisted. "If Eaglefeather and Sparrowtail are already taken."

"Well, Clovertail and I haven't had apprentices yet, but were too new of warriors I think. So you'll probably get one of the older warriors."

"Like Sunfur?" asked Rosekit eagerly.

Hailstorm smiled. "Maybe."

"Or what about Rustypelt?" asked Needlekit. "He's wise and loyal. That's what Creekfall and Aspenleaf told me."

"Or maybe Moonshine?" asked Rosekit. "Has she had an apprentice?"

"I think so," meowed Hailstorm, although he didn't know whether or not his mother had actually trained an apprentice; she seemed more like a nursery queen than a warrior or mentor.

Needlekit suddenly sighed. "We've still got three more moons until we can become apprentices."

"And I bet Raypaw will be a warrior by then," sighed Pinekit.

"Yes," nodded Hailstorm. "He's supposed to get his warrior name soon, I think; it depends on if Twigfoot thinks he's ready though."

Jealousy filled Needlekit's light brown eyes.

A silence followed this, and the three kits sat in thought, staring at each other. Hailstorm noticed that they'd become quite big, especially Needlekit. He sure looked a lot like his father.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the High-stone for a Clan meeting!"

Hailstorm's head jerked up at the call, and he looked at the High-stone. Eveningstar sat on top of it, dark gray fur ruffled from the breeze as the clouds continued to clump together. Hailstorm looked to the side and saw Goldheart and Yellowpaw at his side, and Hailstorm narrowed his eyes in confusion. What was going on? Why were the medicine cats up there? Did it have something to do with what they were whispering to each other earlier?

Hailstorm glanced toward the kits to tell them to find their parents at the High-stone, but they were gone. He looked around and spotted them sitting eagerly at the front, eyes glowing, with Aspenleaf and Creekfall behind them.

Bronzepelt sat up and walked across the clearing, with Gravelpelt and Twilightfoot next to him. Sparktail and Rustypelt joined Moonshine, Sunfur, and Prairiefoot, while Copperleaf sat beside Spruceclaw. Sparrowtail settled beside Eaglefeather and Meadowheart, and Raypaw followed them, sitting by Clovertail. Hailstorm walked over and joined Raypaw and Clovertail, curling his tail neatly over his paws as he stared up at the Clan leader.

"Thank you," Eveningstar meowed to the Clan. "Goldheart and Yellowpaw brought something to my attention in my den, and Goldheart wants to share it with you," Eveningstar announced.

The orange tom dipped his head at Eveningstar, then stepped forward, Yellowpaw right behind him. "Cats of DawnClan, I have something to tell you," he sighed. "And I apologize in advance; I should have told you earlier. It would have saved worry..." The medicine cat bowed his head, and Hailstorm exchanged a worried glance with Clovertail. Goldheart shook his head, then gazed over the Clan again, taking a deep breath. "The night Echoheart and Whispersong disappeared, well... before they left," his voice was barely a whisper above the breeze, and Hailstorm strained his ears to hear him. "They came to see me and Yellowpaw. They told us that they needed to leave, that they'd had a message from StarClan."

Hailstorm couldn't believe his ears. Goldheart had *known* that they were going to leave?

Why did Echoheart tell Goldheart and not me?

"Oh, mouse-dung to that!" Eaglefeather rolled his eyes, but Eveningstar silenced him with a glare. "A dream from StarClan?" the black- and brown-furred tom added incredulously.

"They said they'd had a call from the mountains, that they needed to go there to find something that'd help us," Goldheart continued.

"We don't need help!" meowed Copperleaf, and Spruceclaw nodded.

Goldheart ignored him, sighing. "Moons ago, just before leaf-bare, Yellowpaw and I had a dream from StarClan at the Moonfall. A StarClan cat came to us and said: 'In new-leaf, the Two in your Clan will leave; the mountains will soon be calling them'."

"*The* Two?" asked Sparktail, her amber eyes filled with confusion.

"I don't know," Goldheart shook his head. "But when Echoheart and Whispersong told me that they needed to leave for the mountains, I knew that 'the Two' from our dream was referring to Echoheart and Whispersong."

The DawnClan cats stared at each other in bewilderment.

"What do we need from the mountains though?" asked Bronzepelt logically. "I mean, our only problem right now is DayClan, but we don't need to go to the mountains to realize *that*."

Sparrowtail and Moonshine, who were sitting next to him, nodded, and Creekfall meowed something quietly to Bronzepelt, who nodded back.

"Like I said, we have no idea. Not yet anyway," Goldheart sighed.

"Also," Rustypelt asked in confusion. "Why couldn't they have asked one of us to go with them? Or why couldn't they at least *tell* us before they left? We're their Clanmates, and this affects the whole Clan; we have a right to know these things!"

"They needed to go by themselves; it said that in their dream," Yellowpaw spoke up. "That's what they told us."

Goldheart nodded. "It was important; there's something the

mountains can help us with, and somehow Whispersong and Echoheart, chosen by StarClan, can help."

"Chosen by StarClan?" Twigfoot echoed, his ears twitching in disbelief.

"And how can the *mountains* help us?" Creekfall repeated the earlier-asked question.

Meadowheart nodded. "We've heard stories about how dangerous the mountains are: it's always snowy and freezing cold; and the jagged cliffs and canyons mean certain death for any cat who slips..." The tortoiseshell and white warrior shook her head, voice trailing off.

Gravelpelt nodded angrily. "Why would they want to go? What about their Clan?"

"Well, if StarClan sent them there, we can't argue with that," Aspenleaf reasoned.

"Yes, but do we *really* know if StarClan sent them? Did they *really* have a dream?" asked Eaglefeather. "What if they're being oblivious young cats looking for adventure—"

Sparktail turned on him, eyes blazing. "How dare you accuse them —"

Rustypelt cut in between them. "We need to trust their decision, and StarClan's," he meowed sternly, casting glances at both warriors through narrowed eyes.

Sunfur stood up and faced the Clan, her eyes narrowed but her voice calm. "Goldheart and Yellowpaw said Echoheart and Whispersong told them they'd had a dream from StarClan. And Goldheart and Yellowpaw had dreams, too. To say that Echoheart and Whispersong didn't have a dream from StarClan is to say that Goldheart and Yellowpaw are lying."

There was a silence, and the cats in the clearing shared glaces.

"We can ask them all about it when they come back," Twigfoot

meowed.

"*If* they come back," muttered Prairiefoot, and a few cats around him nodded.

Sparrowtail shook her head. "They're strong. They'll make it; you'll see."

"Yes," Sunfur meowed, nodding. "If StarClan sent them on the mission, StarClan will bring them back." Everyone nodded thoughtfully at Sunfur, and Hailstorm just hoped it was true.

Eveningstar dipped his head to Sunfur, then yowled to the Clan, "We have to trust StarClan to see this through and pray that our two warriors return safely." He blinked slowly, then meowed, "Anything else to add?"

Yellowpaw shook head slowly then turned to look at her mentor expectantly, but Goldheart didn't respond. His usually bright orange eyes were now dull as he stared at his paws, looking distant. Something flashed in his eyes, and he looked up. Wind ripped through the clearing as the dark clouds that had hovered around the mountains earlier finally blew in. Shadows fell over the camp, and Hailstorm heard Aspenleaf's kits squeak in fright, cowering under their mother's cream belly fur.

A chill swept through Hailstorm, and Clovertail shuddered beside him. Eveningstar and Yellowpaw were crouched over against the wind, staring at Goldheart in shock as he sat taller, orange eyes blazing like fire. The medicine cat's trance-like gaze swept over the Clan, causing shivers to race along Hailstorm's spine. The medicine cat was staring at something no one else could see.

Goldheart blinked slowly, then muttered in a low, hollow voice, "A danger is coming, a danger that will bring a tide of death. A prophecy is unfolding."

Yellowpaw stared at him in worry, and Hailstorm realized what his sister was realizing: Goldheart was having a vision!

Hailstorm stared at the orange tom in shock. A danger? A *prophecy*

? *Death* ? Hailstorm's mind reeled. Was that why Echoheart and Whispersong left? Did they know there was a danger coming, a danger that would bring death as Goldheart said? A danger that the mountains could help with, like their dream supposedly told them?

"It will cast darkness on the forest," Goldheart continued, and he looked at the dark gray sky, the thick storm clouds rolling in quickly. Then his voice lowered ominously. "Treacherous skies lay ahead. The storm is on its way."

Chapter 11

Whispersong blinked open her eyes as sunlight streamed through the branches of bush they'd slept under. She sat up and stretched, feeling the warmth of the sun rays in her fur. The sun was just above the horizon, glowing on everything its light touched. The morning sky was a pale yellow, and the clouds that dotted the sky like leaves on the forest floor in leaf-fall were orange and yellow.

Whispersong felt Echoheart still curled up next to her, her sister's gray tabby fur bright in the light of dawn. Whispersong smiled, then turned her head and saw Bumblefrost sitting a few tail-lengths away, his thick black tail curled neatly around his paws. Whispersong stood up and padded over to him.

He looked up as she approached, and smiled. "Good morning," he yawned.

"Are River, Hazel, and Pansy awake yet?" she asked.

Bumblefrost shook his head. "No, of course not. They probably wake up at sunhigh every day," he meowed, twitching his tail in annoyance.

"Well, they are kittypets," Whispersong pointed out. "They probably aren't used to having to wake up at dawn every day."

Bumblefrost snorted but said nothing, and Whispersong knew he disliked kittypets and their 'soft, useless lives'.

Whispersong gazed over the field of tall grasses and flowers, waving in the breeze. A small creek gurgled in the distance, glimmering in

the bright sunlight. Above, the blue sky was filled with feathery clouds that drifted along peacefully, pushed by the wind.

"We should hunt," meowed Bumblefrost.

Whispersong nodded. "We need to have strength for when we pass through Twolegplace; who knows how long we'll be in there?" She shuddered.

"And I doubt there'll be any prey either; with the stench of the Thunderpaths and the noise of the Twolegs, prey won't be anywhere near Twolegplace."

Whispersong nodded, then turned to wake up Echoheart.

* * *

Whispersong carried a robin in her jaws, walking side-by-side with Echoheart and Bumblefrost. Together, they each had one large meal, and a little extra for any other cat who was hungry.

They padded through the open grassland, small trees and bushes growing here and there. Soon the old mesh bordering where the three kittypets lived came into view, and the small, faded red Twoleg den, possibly their barn, popped up next. To the right, the larger of the two Twoleg dens stood, gray and white. Whispersong knew that it was where the kittypets' Twolegs lived, but they were gone right now.

Bumblefrost lead the way through the mesh, careful not to touch it. Whispersong followed, with Echoheart close behind. They trotted through the grass that danced by their paws, and soon they saw Pansy sitting on one of the mesh posts next to a small cherry tree, washing her ears. When she saw them, she leapt down and ran to greet them, her gray-brown tabby tail swishing in happiness.

"Hello," she meowed. "We've been waiting."

"More like *we've* been waiting," Bumblefrost muttered to Whispersong.

Pansy didn't hear him. "Have you eaten?" she asked.

"No," Echoheart replied, dropping her prey. "Not yet."

Pansy nodded. "Well, neither have we."

"We have extra prey," Whispersong meowed, pushing a large rabbit toward Pansy.

The gray-brown kittypet smiled. "Thanks. River and Hazel are already eating, but I insisted on waiting for you, so I haven't eaten yet."

"You didn't have to," Whispersong meowed.

Pansy just smiled and dragged the rabbit toward the barn-like den, where River sat eating a mouse and Hazel washed her paws. They looked up when the four cats walked in, and River meowed, "Okay, good; you're here. We'll finish our meals, then leave immediately. I want to get to the Twolegplace before dusk."

Whispersong nodded, then bent down to eat her robin, while Bumblefrost ate his vole and Echoheart ate her shrew.

Once all six cats had finished their meals, River lead the way out of the territory, soon heading through the wooden mesh and out onto the grassland, the hills rolling in the distance toward the horizon. The green grass waved as the warm, refreshing new-leaf breeze swept across the moorland. The scattered wildflowers danced along to the rhythm of the waving grass, while birds sang above the cats' heads, chasing each other through the blue sky. The sun, halfway to sunhigh, drifted behind large, fluffy white clouds.

Whispersong closed her eyes as her paws carried her forward, and she breathed in the fresh scents of new-leaf happily. When she opened her eyes again, she saw Bumblefrost and Echoheart walking beside River, while Pansy and Hazel followed a few pawsteps behind.

Curiosity and adventurousness filled Whispersong's body as she thought about how far they'd traveled. No other cat, besides maybe the Clans' predecessors, had seen this far, and Whispersong felt strangely jubilant and honored as she thought about how she was

one of the first and one of the only cats to travel beyond the Moonfall in the honor of her Clan.

Then guilt crept into her heart as she thought about how they had left without even telling any cat. *Well, we told Goldheart...*

Whispersong sighed, looking ahead again. She padded onward, following River across the grassland. She stepped into pace beside Pansy. "How far have you gone from your territory before?" she asked her.

Pansy shrugged. "Well, we don't leave often, but we do go through the Twolegplace sometimes to visit friends and to explore."

"How long does it take to get to the edge of Twolegplace? And how long does it take to get through it?"

Pansy tilted her head in thought, then looked up at the sky. "We should get there when the sun is straight up."

Whispersong looked at the sun; it was nearing sunhigh.

"And it usually takes only a few days to get through Twolegplace," Pansy added.

Whispersong swallowed nervously. A few *days* ? She didn't want to be stuck with Twolegs for even a heartbeat! She hated the stench and noise of the Thunderpaths and the Twolegs. Echoheart shook her head, then followed Pansy, River, and Hazel over the hills, walking side-by-side with Echoheart and Bumblefrost, slowly getting closer to Twolegplace and the mountains with every pawstep.

* * *

By sunhigh, they had reached the outer edges of the Twolegplace, like Pansy had promised. Twoleg dens lined a small dirt Thunderpath, with tall grasses growing on the outside and in the middle of it. No monsters were in sight for as far as she could see, and the only sounds she could hear were the distant barking of a dog and the wind in the grass and trees.

"This way," meowed River, his ears angled ahead. He lead the way across the silent dirt Thunderpath and headed into the tall grass beside an old, faded white Twoleg den, where rusted monsters sat as if they'd died, with large weeds engulfing them.

"Why don't Twolegs do anything with their monster if it dies?" Echoheart turned and whispered in Whispersong's ear. Whispersong shrugged.

Whispersong watched warily as they passed the Twoleg den, yowls coming from the other side of it. Whispersong lowered herself in the grass as three Twoleg kits came running from behind the den, tossing a big, red, rock-like thing at each other. Two of them jumped into the air and shrieked when the third one missed the rock. Whispersong twitched her ears in confusion.

"Twolegs don't have very good sense of smell, but the longer we wait here, the better the chance that they'll end up seeing us," Bumblefrost muttered. "We need to leave now, especially since we don't have much cover in the grass."

River looked at the DayClan cat. "Alright."

"We need to get out of here!" hissed Hazel, gazing through the grass at the approaching Twoleg kits, which were unaware of the cats hiding in their path.

River turned his head in alarm. "Ready—"

He was cut off as the bright red, bouncy rock suddenly landed right next to them. Whispersong shrieked and jumped in fright, feeling her fur and tail fluff up. Footsteps thundered nearer, and the youngest Twoleg raced right toward them. Whispersong skidded in the dirt, frantically tearing at the grass to get a grip. She barely noticed that Bumblefrost was disappearing to her left and Echoheart was right beside Pansy and Hazel, heading in the opposite direction.

Whispersong raced ahead, hearing the Twolegs squeal as they saw the cats, and they gave chase. Whispersong picked up speed and darted left, trying to confuse the Twolegs. She leapt over a creek and saw a small patch of trees up ahead. She heard the panting of

cats on either side of her, and she realized that they too were heading toward the trees; she just hoped they were Pansy, Hazel, River, Echoheart, and Bumblefrost, and not enemy cats.

But Whispersong didn't have time to think about it. In a few heartbeats she was tearing at bark, clawing her way to safety. Some cat was right behind her, but Whispersong didn't look back, she kept putting one paw in front of the other, and soon began leaping from one branch to the next, until they became too thin to stand on, and she stopped, her sides heaving and her heart racing faster than a monster on the Thunderpath. She saw the cat who'd followed her and was relieved to see that it was River. They both looked down at the ground; the Twolegs let out yowls of disappointment as they gazed up at them. After a few heartbeats of jumping up and down they gave up and walked away, back toward their den.

Whispersong sighed in relief.

"That was some good thinking," River meowed through heavy breaths. "Going for these trees. I didn't even think of that."

Whispersong nodded, too winded to speak.

"Where are the others?" River asked worriedly, and Whispersong glanced around at the other trees, but she couldn't see much with the bright green leaves blocking her view. "Oh, I just hope they're safe," River muttered.

"I-I'm... sure.... they are," Whispersong assured the gray tom through heavy breaths.

"There they are!" River meowed suddenly, quickly scampering down the tree, and landing softly on the green grass. Whispersong followed more slowly, remembering the time when she'd almost fallen from a tree while hunting with Sparrowtail. Whispersong shook her head determinedly. If a *kittypet* could climb down a tree that well, then she, a *warrior*, surely could. Whispersong clawed her way down quickly and, when she got close enough to the ground, she jumped, landing clumsily beside River. Whispersong quickly stood up, shaking herself in embarrassment.

River rushed forward toward Hazel, Pansy, Echoheart, and Bumblefrost, who were looking worried.

When Bumblefrost spotted Whispersong, his pale green eyes lit up, and he raced toward her, rubbing his muzzle on her head and breathing softly in her ear. "I thought the Twoleg had taken you," he breathed shakily.

"You think I'd have let a Twoleg take me?" Whispersong scoffed with a laugh, but her heart was racing in excitement as he rested his muzzle against her cheek. This wasn't the greeting a cat would use with a friend, or even with another Clanmate; this was a deeper show of care, of affection. Whispersong's breathing quickened. Did he feel the same way about her, the way she felt about him?

Echoheart stepped forward and touched her nose to Whispersong's, and, for once, Whispersong noticed that she didn't look angry at Bumblefrost for showing his care for her.

River licked his sisters' heads quickly, then got back to his paws. "We should get going before we run into any more housefolk."

Bumblefrost nodded. "Good idea."

* * *

Before long, the fields ended, and the grass turned into hard, Twoleg-made stone and gravel. Thunderpaths weaved around the trees, and monsters raced on their hard surfaces.

"We'd better be more careful here," River murmured. "There are more roads, more housefolk-carriers, and, of course, more housefolk."

Whispersong shook her head at the strange words, even though she knew what they were talking about.

"And there isn't as much plant growth or bushes to hide in," Pansy pointed out.

"Let's get going," Bumblefrost murmured, his thick black tail twitching in apprehension.

River nodded. "Follow me."

Whispersong cast a quick glance at Echoheart; her mottled gray fur was rising along her neck as they set paw inside the dangers of Twolegplace. "Let's go," she whispered to her sister in encouragement.

Echoheart nodded determinedly. "Okay."

Whispersong slowly followed River to the edge of a Thunderpath, Bumblefrost next to her. There weren't any monsters in sight. She could hear a constant roaring in her ears, but she couldn't tell if it was coming from the Thunderpath in front of her or from the ones further away. How would they know which Thunderpath was making the noise?

Hazel spoke up. "We should travel in groups."

River nodded. "Yes, in pairs."

Bumblefrost immediately moved closer to Whispersong, and Whispersong noticed Echoheart looking briefly hurt.

"What about in groups of three?" Whispersong suggested. "You three could cross together, and us three could cross together."

Pansy nodded. "Okay."

River looked at his sisters. "Alright. We'll go first." He stepped forward, his paws on the hard gravel and stone surface of the Thunderpath. He looked from side to side. "Now!"

The three kittypets sprinted across the Thunderpath, and, as they reached the other side, a monster came into view, and raced past them. Whispersong sighed in relief as she heard Hazel safely from the other side, calling, "Your turn!"

Whispersong looked nervously at Echoheart, and her sister nodded in determination.

Bumblefrost stepped forward, then, just as a monster passed, he yowled, "Now!" and raced forward, Whispersong and Echoheart

hard on his paws. Whispersong took the sprint in only a few bounds; she was about to leap into the grass on the edge of the Thunderpath.

Suddenly she heard a loud thud and a yowl of pain. Whispersong skidded to a halt, feeling her pads being torn on the hard gravel. She whipped her head around, her eyes widening in horror.

Echoheart was lying in the middle of the Thunderpath, eyes clenched in pain and fear as a monster suddenly appeared over the hilltop, unaware that there was a cat in its path. Whispersong bunched her muscles to jump out and help her sister, but she was shoved aside. Her face hit the hard Thunderpath, and she felt it sting as the scrapes swelled up with blood.

Whispersong looked up in anger to see Bumblefrost yelling at her. "Get to the other side!" he screamed, and Whispersong barely heard him over the monster. "Now!" he shrieked.

Whispersong quickly scampered to her paws and half-ran, half-wobbled to the other side, where Hazel and Pansy dragged her into the grass.

Whispersong turned her head weakly and saw Bumblefrost racing back across the Thunderpath, heading right into the path of the monster. He grasped Echoheart's scruff in his jaws, then heaved her across the gravel. Whispersong's heart pounded as he dragged Echoheart; the monster was just around the corner. Bumblefrost's eyes widened and he heaved one last time, tossing Echoheart out of the way. Her injured and exhausted body hit the ground limply, only a few tail-lengths from the monster's path, but far enough to be out of harm's way.

Bumblefrost collapsed on the Thunderpath from the effort, and Whispersong looked on helplessly as the monster raced right over him.

Chapter 12

Hailstorm sat beside Raypaw, sharing a sparrow with him. It was early morning, and the sunlight was just poking through the trees, making the green leaves glow. The thunderstorm that had broken out yesterday when Goldheart had told the Clan about Echoheart and Whispersong's departure had blown itself away, the gray clouds now drifting away on the horizon. Puddles scattered the ground, and Aspenleaf's kits played in them, splashing and pushing each other around into them.

"Hailstorm, Raypaw," meowed an approaching voice behind them. Hailstorm turned his gaze away from the kits and saw Twigfoot and Eveningstar walking up to them.

"The four of us are going out on the dawn patrol," Eveningstar meowed. "I'd like to check out the DayClan border," he growled.

"Why? What's wrong?" asked Raypaw worriedly.

"Rainstar agreed to not hunt in NightClan territory too easily at the last Gathering for us not to be suspicious," Eveningstar meowed, twitching his tail impatiently. "Who knows what she's is planning? And now with NightClan weakened, she might see that as an opportunity; an opportunity of what, I'm not sure, but we could check the borders to at least know what DayClan has been doing. Hailstorm, you're a great tracker; I'd like you to come with us to see if you can smell any DayClan scents that shouldn't be there. Raypaw, other cats are needed elsewhere right now, so you can come too."

Hailstorm and Raypaw nodded.

Twigfoot spoke. "Then, after that, Raypaw, you and I will do some battle training."

"Okay," Raypaw dipped his head, excitement glistening in his orange eyes.

Hailstorm got to his paws and followed Eveningstar and Twigfoot across the clearing. They passed through the bramble barrier and continued straight, toward the DayClan border.

Raypaw walked proudly beside the deputy and the Clan leader, and Hailstorm couldn't believe how much he'd grown from the bouncy, hyper cat he was only a moon ago.

When they reached the river, they found, oddly, that the border was quiet and scentless, besides the usual scent markers.

"Let's check the NightClan border," Eveningstar murmured. "Like last time, they could be using the Thunderpath to cross back into NightClan territory, since it would mask their scents."

The patrol turned left then, heading toward the NightClan border. The forest sung with birds, fluttering from tree to tree, and the breeze whispered above their heads, the leaves rustling peacefully. Hailstorm couldn't believe that there was a danger coming, as Goldheart had said a few days ago. The forest seemed so quiet and contented.

Soon Hailstorm heard the roaring of the Thunderpath ahead, even though he couldn't see it through the thick trees.

Eveningstar lead the way through tall grass and bushes and sniffed the edge of the Thunderpath, recoiling and squeezing his eyes shut.

Twigfoot was smelling the air around him. "This border's quiet," he observed.

"Hopefully DayClan had some sense to leave NightClan alone," Raypaw muttered.

"DayClan doesn't have sense," Hailstorm pointed out bitterly. "They-" A loud squeak of surprise made Hailstorm stop. He turned his head. It had come from the other side of the Thunderpath, on NightClan's territory.

Eveningstar twitched his ears. "Was that a *kit*?"

"I don't know, but it sure sounded like one," Twigfoot murmured.

"NightClan should keep better track of their cats, especially with DayClan threatening them."

Hailstorm watched as two small red ears popped up out of the grass, followed by a pair of orange-brown ears and then a small white face. The three kits sprung from the grasses: red, then orange, then white. And then a fourth kit, white with black patches, emerged from the grass, looking hauntingly familiar.

"I thought NightClan only had two kits old enough to be that big?" Raypaw murmured.

Hailstorm nodded. "I thought so too."

The four kits stalked through the grasses and walked along the edge of Thunderpath, unaware of the danger it possessed.

"Which way is home?" asked the dark red one.

"I know there's no trees at camp," mewled the white- and black-patched kit, staring up at the spruce and pine trees with fear.

"No trees in their camp?" Hailstorm echoed in shock.

"Are they *DayClan* kits?" asked Twigfoot in disbelief. "That's a long way to wander for such little kits!" he murmured.

The dark red one walked out onto the Thunderpath boldly, while the white kit asked, "Where's Mother?"

"And Father?" wailed the orange-brown kit.

"We should have never went exploring!" growled the red kit, glaring at the white kit fiercely. "It's all your fault, Lightningkit!"

The white kit cowered. "I-I didn't want-"

The red kit flattened its ears. "Now we're lost!"

"Will we ever see the camp again?" the black- and white-patched kit wailed.

"Now thanks to Lightningkit," growled the orange-brown kit, "I don't know."

The black- and white-patched kit started crying.

"Stormkit!" Lightningkit's tail hung in guilt. "I'm sorry! I just want to be brave, like Mother!"

"Well, no cat can be braver than her," the red kit growled. "Like Father said, she's the Clan *leader*. How can we be braver than *her*?"

The Clan leader was their *mother*? The *DayClan* leader? Hailstorm froze in disbelief.

"They're... they're *Rainstar's* kits?" Twigfoot gasped, voicing Hailstorm's realization aloud.

"Well, no wonder the white and black kit looked familiar," muttered Hailstorm.

"And it's no wonder Rainstar was looking overjoyed at the Gathering a couple of moons ago," murmured Twigfoot. "She had announced that DayClan had had more kits, but no cat ever suspected it would be her."

There was a silence in which they all nodded at Twigfoot's words.

"Shouldn't we help them?" asked Raypaw, watching the kits standing in the Thunderpath helplessly.

Eveningstar shook his head. "If we tried to return them, Rainstar would think we'd stolen them, and she'll be extra protective since they're hers."

"Yes," muttered Twigfoot. "Imagine what she'd do to us."

Suddenly the bushes beside the cats rustled and a NightClan patrol ran out, teeth bared. "Trespassers!" growled one of the cats.

The kits squealed in surprise and scattered. The white- and black-patched kit followed the orange-brown kit into the bushes, while the dark red kit ran into a patch of ferns. The white kit, however,

raced on the Thunderpath, just as a monster roared in the distance. The kit's eyes widened, and Hailstorm winced as it ran past. Once it was gone, Hailstorm could see the white kit lying limp, mangled and twisted, in the middle of the Thunderpath.

"Lightningkit!" the orange-brown kit shrieked, leaping from the bushes. She turned to the NightClan patrol, her fright replaced with anger. She rounded on them, looking right up at Robintail, who was leading it, and Hailstorm was surprised by the kit's bravery. "You killed her!" she growled.

Robintail didn't answer, looking shocked, while the other cats stared wide-eyed at the Thunderpath.

Cliffsand stepped forward. "What are you doing on NightClan's territory?" she asked quietly and full of conviction, though her voice was laced with guilt as she tried not to look at the white kit's mangled body.

"No one sent us," growled the orange-brown kit. "We're not here to spy, fox-hearts!"

"We're lost, okay?" growled the black- and white-patched kit, looking more scared than angry.

Cliffsand exchanged a glance with the rest of her patrol and was about to reply to the kits when suddenly the sound of pawsteps thundered from the meadow. Hailstorm lowered himself into the grass as he saw Rainstar, Burningwood, and Frostwhisker racing along the riverbank, heading straight toward NightClan, pelt bristled. Hailstorm gulped.

Rainstar saw Robintail standing beside the kits and her lip curled. She skidded to a halt and snarled, "Give me back my kits, you fox-hearts!"

"Mother!" squealed the orange-brown kit.

"*Your* kits?" echoed Swantail disbelievingly.

"You're a leader; you can't have kits!" exclaimed Robintail. "They'd distract-"

"And who says?" Rainstar spat, ears flattened as the NightClan warrior criticized her. "Last time I checked, *I* was the leader of DayClan. I'll decide if they're distracting!"

"The only cats forbidden to have kits are medicine cats," Burningwood growled, his eyes narrowed. "The warrior code never says that leaders can't have kits." His claws flexed, and his tail lashed as he stared at the NightClan patrol.

"Let's go home," Rainstar meowed to her kits, then her voice hardened. "You shouldn't have left the nursery. You should have stayed where Frostwhisker could keep an eye on you," she scolded, though it sounded more like a purr compared to what Hailstorm had heard from her before. "So let's get you four-" Rainstar cut off as her gaze landed on the limp white shape on the Thunderpath. "Lightningkit!" she shrieked. She turned to the NightClan patrol, more anger in her blue eyes than Hailstorm had ever seen before. "What have you done?" she screeched, claws flexing. "You killed her!"

"No-" Cliffsand began, her light blue eyes widening in fear, but Rainstar cut her off.

"I'll kill you!" she screamed, revealing her thorn-sharp fangs. She let out a loud hiss, lashing her tail. She bunched her muscles, preparing to launch herself across the Thunderpath.

"Mother, no!" wailed the white- and black-patched kit. "Please don't kill them!" she cried again, eyes widening in fear and shock. The red tom-kit stood beside her in fright as his parents prepared to pounce, looking torn at the thought of seeing another cat murdered.

"You should want revenge, Stormkit and Emberkit!" the orange-brown tabby she-kit spat. "It's their fault our sister is dead."

Hailstorm saw Burningwood lean into Rainstar and meow something in her ears, and Hailstorm only caught a few words carried on the breeze. "...don't... see more death."

"But they need to learn," persisted Rainstar, her tone a firm and menacing snarl.

"...settle... time... more warriors... no kits watching," growled Burningwood.

Rainstar finally nodded, her blue eyes swimming with deep thought; a plan was forming in her mind, and Hailstorm was sure it wasn't a good one. "This is not over with," Rainstar snarled to Robintail. "You'd better watch your back."

Frostwhisker, who'd stood there silently the whole time, finally meowed, "Come on kits."

"Can you help us across, Father?" the dark red tom-kit stammered, staring wide-eyed.

Burningwood nodded, his pale green eyes soft. He looked for monsters, then walked onto the Thunderpath. "Okay, come to me." As his kits slowly crept forward, Burningwood kept his gaze fixed on the NightClan patrol, red ears flattened and bushy tail lashing.

The three kits carefully walked across the Thunderpath, meeting their father halfway and walking beside him to the safety of the other side. The orange-brown she-kit buried her face in her mother's fur when they reached her. "I thought I'd never see you again," the kit murmured.

"It's alright, Flamekit," Rainstar purred to her daughter, and Hailstorm was shocked to find that she *was* purring.

"So we'll never see Lightningkit again?" asked the red tom-kit.

Burningwood shook his head. "No, Emberkit. Thanks to NightClan, she's dead." He walked back to the Thunderpath and picked up Lightningkit's body, spitting a threat at the NightClan cats' paws as he neared. He shook his head in fury and disgust, then carried his dead daughter back into DayClan territory, where they would bury her.

"When we get home, we'll get you some fresh-kill," Frostwhisker soothed.

Flamekit and Emberkit nodded, eyes narrowed in hatred at the NightClan cats, then followed their parents, while Stormkit stared at

the ground as she walked beside Frostwhisker.

Robintail shook his head in worry and muttered, "There's trouble ahead."

Hailstorm knew that the NightClan warrior was right. Rainstar would seek revenge for Lightningkit's death.

Chapter 13

Echoheart lifted her head groggily.

She was lying in the grass, beside the Thunderpath where she'd fallen. Memories flooded her mind. Bumblefrost had saved her life, again. What was it with Bumblefrost and saving her life? Maybe he was just trying to prove to her that he was a good cat, or maybe he just didn't want Whispersong to have to bear with the grief if Echoheart had died. Then an image flashed in Echoheart's mind: of Bumblefrost lying in the Thunderpath, helpless, as the monster sped over him. She'd blacked out just then, and she still didn't know what had happened after that. Echoheart sat up in worry. Bumblefrost *couldn't* be dead. Blood rushed to her head and she became dizzy, black spots dotting her vision. She fell back to the ground, blackness flashing before her again. She heard some cat comfort her and press herbs on her leg, then she slipped into unconsciousness again.

Echoheart opened her eyes. It was now dark, and the crescent moon shone through the thin clouds. She turned her head and saw Whispersong curled up beside Bumblefrost. The two were fast asleep, their flanks rising and falling together. The DayClan warrior's fur was only bearing a few scratches, but other than that, he was unharmed.

Echoheart sighed in relief and laid back down. She silently thanked StarClan for saving him. Even though it felt like StarClan couldn't see them through the lights of the Twolegplace, Echoheart knew they were there, and she felt their guiding presence.

"You're awake," meowed a relieved voice. Echoheart turned her head and saw Pansy gazing down at her. Echoheart guessed she was on watch.

"Yes," Echoheart rasped, feeling her voice crack. "I'm okay, right?

No major injuries?"

"Yes, you're okay," soothed Pansy. "Whispersong made sure of it."

"And Bumblefrost's okay too?" she added quietly.

"Yes, he's just fine."

"Good," Echoheart murmured.

"Now, get some sleep," Pansy murmured.

Echoheart barely heard her; she was already drifting back into unconsciousness.

The next time Echoheart opened her eyes, the sun was rising up above the hills beyond them, and Pansy and Hazel were still asleep, curled up next to each other in the long grass. River was walking up the hill with Bumblefrost, each carrying a dark gray bird in their jaws. They were talking to each other like old friends, nodding as they walked side by side.

Whispersong ran to meet Bumblefrost and sniffed the prey. "What are they?" she asked.

"Pigeons," meowed River, dropping the bird. "They usually live in Twolegplaces."

"Oh," meowed Whispersong.

River padded over to his sisters and prodded them awake. "It's time to eat. We need to get moving."

Hazel lifted her head. "But what about Echoheart?"

"What about me?" Echoheart asked, getting shakily to her paws.

"Oh," meowed Hazel, looking embarrassed when Echoheart overheard her. "I thought you wouldn't be able to walk after your... injuries."

"I'm fine," Echoheart insisted. "Just a few scratches."

"But how are you *feeling* ?" Whispersong asked.

Echoheart shrugged. "I'm alright."

"Good." Whispersong smiled, looking her over. "You look good to go. The scrapes might sting, but you look fine other than that."

Echoheart blinked. "Why did I fall on the Thunderpath? I felt fine until I suddenly fell," Echoheart murmured, recalling that moment; she'd been running along behind Whispersong, then her paws had failed and she was on the ground, her side scraping along the hard gravel.

Whispersong looked thoughtful. "Well, I think it was because of the leg you dislocated. It gave way beneath you."

"How is it you know so much about healing all of a sudden?" Echoheart asked.

"I don't know." Whispersong narrowed her eyes in confusion, staring at her paws.

"Well, I'm glad you remembered it," Echoheart meowed.

Whispersong smiled, then pushed Bumblefrost's pigeon toward her. "We can all three share it."

"Okay," Echoheart meowed gratefully, taking a bite of the bird hungrily. Bumblefrost soon came over and joined them, while River, Hazel, and Pansy shared the other one.

Once the six had finished, River lead them through the grass and trees and small scattered Twoleg dens, trying to avoid Thunderpaths as well as Twolegs, dogs, and other cats. The clouds, thin as feathers, floated gracefully above their heads, while the sun ascended higher into the sky until it was directly above them. By that time, Echoheart's legs became sore and she grew weaker as hunger set in. Her paws dragged, and she saw that she wasn't the only one; all six of them were panting after walking so far. Luckily, they hadn't had any trouble with Twolegs or their dogs, and the few Thunderpaths that there were quiet compared to the busy one where Echoheart and Bumblefrost had fallen and narrowly escaped

death.

Eventually the Twoleg structures grew closer together and we're much larger. River had called it the center of the Twolegplace, where many Twolegs gathered. He'd also said that it was where the most Thunderpaths were and the most Twolegs.

In the center of the Twoleg-gathering-place was a small field of short grass covered in patches of shade from large oak and beech trees. Twolegs and their kits sat together, and dogs chased them around. River was right: this was definitely a place where Twolegs gathered. All the commotion made Echoheart wary. She could sense Whispersong and Bumblefrost's nervousness too, and hoped River knew what to do and how to get away from this place.

River stared across the field, his eyes darting back and forth.

"Let's go," Pansy murmured.

"Quickly," Hazel added, "and quietly."

River nodded and crept across the field, the short grass making it hard to hide and walk across the Twoleg field without being noticed. Echoheart lowered herself to the ground, her belly fur rubbing against the grass. Her ears were flattened and her eyes darted back and forth, searching for any danger.

When they reached the other side, luckily not being chased by anything, they crossed two other Thunderpaths and found themselves in a cluster of Twoleg dens, where monsters rested and Twoleg kits played. River walked taller than he did before, and Echoheart guessed that he felt more familiar with this type of area than the busy places in the Twolegplace. Hazel pranced around her brother, and Pansy lifted her tail high behind them.

"Isn't this where Cosmo lives?" Pansy asked.

"Yes," purred Hazel.

"Who's Cosmo?" Bumblefrost asked warily.

"He's a housecat who lives around here. His housefolk have quite a

bit of territory for being in the center of the city," River meowed, his dark gray tail swishing in delight.

Hazel nodded and licked her lips.

Echoheart and Whispersong exchanged glances.

"What are we going to do at his Twoleg's den?" Whispersong asked cautiously.

"Hunt," meowed River. "His housefolk have these things called seed-holders and they attract birds that we can catch."

"But won't he be protective of his hunting grounds?" asked Bumblefrost, narrowing his eyes. "Most cats are."

Hazel flicked her tail dismissively. "He loves company. Plus, since you're traveling with us, he won't mind."

"Alright..." muttered Echoheart, still wary.

River suddenly turned toward a dark gray and cream-colored Twoleg den and leapt up on top of a line of tall, flat tree trunks.

"It's another type of territory marking. It's called a fence," Pansy told them, seeing their blank faces.

"Oh," murmured Whispersong, watching Hazel and Pansy disappear on the other side of the thing she called a fence. Bumblefrost shrugged at them, then leapt up onto the top of it, his claws scraping the wood for a grip. Then he leapt down to the other side. Whispersong nodded at Echoheart and motioned for her to go next. Echoheart bunched her leg muscles and then sprang off the ground, clawing her way to the top of the wood. Then she shook her pelt and jumped off, landing safely on the other side. Whispersong landed beside her a heartbeat later, and ran to join Bumblefrost.

Echoheart gazed at the Twoleg's territory and widened her eyes. A clump of pine and aspen trees was at the center, each having a seed-holder where robins, blue jays, chickadees, and sparrows fluttered. Echoheart licked her lips.

"River! Pansy! Hazel!" called a voice to Echoheart's right, and she saw a long-haired black tom with a white underbelly walking out from the Twoleg den.

"It's good to see you, Cosmo," River dipped his head and smiled.

The tom swept his gaze over the three kittypets. "You look good," he commented, then he paused when he saw Bumblefrost, Echoheart, and Whispersong. "Who are these cats?" he asked, his bushy tail flicking in wariness. "They aren't housecats are they?"

"No," Hazel answered. "They are passing through. They're headed to the mountains. We've traveled all day and we were wondering if we can eat and rest here," the gray-brown she-cat meowed politely, then added, "If that's alright."

Bumblefrost stepped forward and nodded at the kittypet. "We'd appreciate it if you'd let us hunt here. We mean no harm to you, or your... housefolk; we just need to eat and rest."

Cosmo looked the DayClan warrior over and finally nodded. "Alright. My housefolk also have a fountain you can drink from."

Fountain? Echoheart blinked in confusion.

"Thank you," Hazel meowed gratefully to Cosmo.

The black and white tom nodded. "Any time." Then he turned to River. "Help yourselves to the birds, if you can catch any," he meowed, sweeping his tail across the grass. "If you don't mind, I'm going back in my den; I'm tired."

River nodded. "Of course."

Whispersong leaned into Echoheart's ear and whispered, "Looks like all he *does* is sleep," and Echoheart had to bite back a snort of laughter.

With that, Cosmo turned and disappeared inside the Twoleg den, leaving the six cats to themselves.

"What in StarClan's name is a *fountain* ?" asked Bumblefrost as soon

as Cosmo left.

"It's this thing that's made of stone, and it holds water and makes endless waterfalls," Pansy meowed. Echoheart cocked her head in confusion. Pansy pointed across the territory and meowed, "Look."

Echoheart followed her gaze and saw a tall stone structure with four small waterfalls coming out from each side, pooling into the lower stone basin.

Whispersong crept forward and sniffed the fountain. She wrinkled her nose, then walked around it, sniffing every section. Then, deciding it was safe, she shook her silver tabby pelt and sprang off the ground, landing wobbly on top of the lower stone basin. Echoheart watched her sit down on it to taste the water. "It's good," she meowed. "Not as fresh or cold as the river, but still good."

Bumblefrost ran up to the fountain and leapt up beside Whispersong, tasting the water as well. Echoheart padded forward, jumping up beside the two warriors. She balanced on the stone, then sat on the right side of Whispersong. She lowered her head and lapped up the fountain's water, feeling it refresh her from head to tail. She swallowed, then licked her lips and sat up.

A loud chirping to Echoheart's left made her turn her head. A sparrow was hopping along a low pine tree branch, eating the seeds in the seed-holder. Echoheart licked her lips and jumped off the fountain, creeping forward. She paused beneath the branch and looked up, waiting for it to be in jumping reach. Her tail flicked with impatience, but she forced herself to stay still. Suddenly the sparrow hopped onto a lower branch and Echoheart instinctively sprang off of the ground and grabbed the small brown bird in her claws, pulling it back down to the ground.

"That was a nice catch!" meowed Pansy, her amber eyes wide in admiration.

Echoheart picked the bird up carefully. She flicked her ears in embarrassment and muttered her thanks through the mouthful of feathers. Then she dropped it at the kittypets' paws. "You can have this one. I can catch another."

"I can hunt, thanks," meowed River curtly, who'd watched her hunt the sparrow as well. Echoheart flicked her ears in surprise. Was he *jealous* ? River got to his paws and headed to the opposite end of the Twoleg's territory, sniffing the ground for any prey-scent.

Echoheart looked at Pansy in confusion, but she just shook her head. "He's just used to taking on the role of caring for us. He always has, ever since our mother died; he'd taken charge of caring for the three of us after that, and it hasn't changed. I think he finds it weird that there are other cats who are stronger and... well, better at survival skills than he is, like hunting."

Echoheart blinked. "Well, he has to have expected that there are cats better at hunting than him. We've lived as warriors all our lives; out in the forest and in the wild."

"Just give him some time."

Echoheart blinked in acknowledgement. "Do you want this?" she asked, pointing at the dead sparrow.

Hazel shook her head. "I think River is going to bring us something."

"Have you always lived as kittypets, I mean, housecats?" Echoheart asked, wondering how they'd learned to hunt if they'd lived the soft life of kittypets ever since they were born.

"We were born housecats. Our mother lived with a pair of Twolegs and we were born in their den," Hazel began sadly. "Then when she died, the Twolegs neglected us in their grief for her."

Echoheart lowered her gaze; how did they *not* expect the Twolegs to ignore them? Twolegs were oblivious to *everything*. But Echoheart didn't say anything.

"A loner who'd just lost her only kit adopted us," Pansy put in. "She trained us in basic hunting skills and fighting techniques."

"One day, she never came back from a hunting trip, and we wandered around trying to find her," Hazel murmured.

"That's when Magpie and Rye found us," Pansy meowed, staring off in the distance as the memory came back to her. "They asked us if we were lost; we were still very young, way younger than you are, and we hadn't actually caught prey by ourselves yet. Magpie and Rye took us to the Twoleg house we live in now, where we were cared for and fed."

"One day," Hazel laughed. "River decided we were going to hunt for ourselves."

"Yes," Pansy smiled. "It took many days of frustration and falling before River finally caught his first prey."

"Sounds like a rough kithood," Echoheart commented. It seemed harder than in a Clan, where every cat took care of one another; the strong helped the weak and the young helped the old. But for Pansy, Hazel, and River, they had no cats to hunt for them when they couldn't; they had to learn everything on their own.

Hazel shrugged. "It was, but we're happy now, and we all three have each other." Pansy nodded at her sister, smiling.

Just then, River came back with a large squirrel in his jaws. Echoheart dipped her head and left the three littermates to enjoy their meal. She brought her sparrow with her began to dig in, not realizing how hungry she actually was until she took her first bite. She finished with a few hungry bites, licking her lips.

Echoheart caught movement at the corner of her eye and turned her head to see Bumblefrost and Whispersong finishing up their meal together, the setting sun's light glowing on their pelts. Bumblefrost bent over to Whispersong and rubbed his muzzle along her cheek, which sent chills down Echoheart's spine. Then he began licking her head, moving down her cheek and along her neck. Echoheart bristled. What in StarClan's name did they think they were doing?

The conflict started up in Echoheart's head again. Bumblefrost was from *DayClan* and Whispersong was from *DawnClan*. They'd have to part after the journey; surely they were aware of that? Echoheart knew he and her sister cared about each other, but what would happen when they got home and every cat guessed why

Bumblefrost had insisted on going to the mountains with them? What would they do when soon they'd be forbidden to so much as glance at each other?

Echoheart shook her head. She knew it wasn't her choice; Whispersong had made a clear point of that many times over. But Echoheart just worried about her sister.

Echoheart glanced at the two again and saw Bumblefrost rub his muzzle to Whispersong's and stare warmly into her eyes. He bent forward and slowly licked her nose. Whispersong stepped closer to him and rubbed her head along his chest fur, silver against brown and black.

Echoheart then heard four words come from Bumblefrost's mouth, four words that had her neck fur bristling.

"I love you, Whispersong."

Echoheart gritted her teeth and felt her claws unsheathe.

"I... I love you too, Bumblefrost."

They rested their heads on each other's, and Echoheart could sense their love for each other, stronger than Echoheart had thought, and her heart sank.

"I... I don't know what I'd do without you here, without you with me."

"I don't either. But I know that I'd wait, for as long as it would take to find you again. I'd... I'd wait all of my life for you," Bumblefrost meowed quietly. "No matter the weather, no matter the mountains or rivers that lay between us. I'd find you. I'd wait for you."

Whispersong seemed to melt into Bumblefrost as he said this, and their two shapes, illuminated by the setting sun, became one. Then they got to their paws and began to walk, side-by-side, to the edge of the Twoleg territory, away from Echoheart. They were talking, and Echoheart found that she could no longer hear them.

Bumblefrost paused and stared up at the sky, then looked back

down at Whispersong. She circled around him, running her tail along his chin and meowing something to him with mischief in her brown eyes. He narrowed his eyes playfully and muttered something with a sarcastic smile. Whispersong burst out laughing and pushed him over. Bumblefrost let out a grunt of surprise then leapt after Whispersong. Whispersong ran through the grass, the dandelions sending fluffy, white seeds flying, swirling into the evening sky.

Watching them filled Echoheart's heart with longing; she missed Hailstorm deeply. She gazed up at the sky, the orange fading into the gray light of twilight. The first few stars appeared in the sky between the large pine trees of above her head. She gazed at the near-half-moon, shining brightly against the darkening sky. She wondered if Hailstorm was looking at it too, thinking of her as she was thinking of him. Had he figured out why they'd left? Had Goldheart or Yellowpaw told any cat?

Echoheart sighed. She just hoped that every cat trusted her enough to come back, like Goldheart had.

I promise I'll come home, she silently vowed.

Echoheart turned to the stars. *StarClan, watch over my Clanmates*, she prayed. *And whatever happens, bring us home to them*.

* * *

"Thank you so much, Cosmo," Hazel dipped her head to the black and white tom. "For the food and resting places."

"Yes," Whispersong nodded. "Thank you."

River blinked in gratitude.

The black and white kittypet shuffled his paws in embarrassment and smiled slightly.

"Now the six of us will travel through the rest of the city with full bellies," Pansy purred.

Cosmo nodded. "I'm glad I could help." Then he turned to

Echoheart, Whispersong, and Bumblefrost. "Where did you say you were headed? The mountains?"

"Yes," Bumblefrost nodded. "We, well—" he cut off, glancing at Whispersong and Echoheart, not knowing what to tell the kittypet.

They'd told Bumblefrost about finding mountain cats, but he didn't know *why* they had to find them. Then again, neither did Echoheart or Whispersong. All they knew was that finding these cats that lived in the mountains would somehow help with the prophecy. She didn't know what was so special about the mountains, or the mountain cats, though; why couldn't StarClan just *tell* them?

"We were sent there on a mission, by... by cats where we live," Whispersong meowed.

Cosmo tilted his head. "Really?"

Echoheart nodded.

"Well... Good luck."

"Thanks." Echoheart dipped her head.

River stepped forward. "We really do need to get going. We still have a long way to go and there's only a limited amount of light left in the day." He looked up at the sun, which was climbing higher and higher toward sunhigh with every passing heartbeat.

"I'll walk you to the safest and quickest way out of my neighborhood," Cosmo offered.

"That'd be great," purred Pansy.

Echoheart heard Whispersong ask her, "What in StarClan's name is a *neighborhood* ?"

Echoheart shrugged. She'd never understand kittypet talk.

With that, Cosmo leapt up and over the tall fence that marked the borders of his territory, with River close behind and Pansy and Hazel following swiftly. Bumblefrost and Whispersong went next,

and Echoheart came last.

Once all of them had landed on the other side of Cosmo's territory-marker, River nodded to Cosmo. "Lead the way."

Cosmo nodded and turned left, heading down a small, quiet Thunderpath, with the other Twoleg dens lined along it, tightly packed and filled with the loud noises of Twolegs. A dog started barking as they passed another fence, and Echoheart jumped in surprise. Whispersong and Bumblefrost bristled, and their tails fluffed up to twice their normal sizes. Pansy's and Hazel's neck fur rose, but other than that they showed no fear of the dog.

"Don't the Twolegs ever shut that thing up?" Bumblefrost growled irritably, his large, fluffed-up tail twitching.

"It can't get outside its housefolk's territory unless they let it, which is comforting," Cosmo meowed, not at all looking fazed by the spitting and barking dog to their left.

"Comforting," Bumblefrost echoed to Whispersong sarcastically.

The black and white kittypet stopped at a small narrow passageway lined with gray stone; it was long and dark, and shadows from large trees turned the ground black. The place reeked of carrion and crow-food, along with Twoleg rubbish and moldy leaves. Echoheart wrinkled up her nose and shivered in apprehension. Was Cosmo seriously thinking of leading them through there?

Bumblefrost seemed to be thinking the same thing. He flexed his claws. "No. We are *not* going in there," he growled. "You expect us to walk through *that* ?"

"It's not dangerous," Cosmo protested, looking slightly annoyed at Bumblefrost. "It's just an alley, a quick passageway from one part of the neighborhood to another."

"I don't speak *kittypet*." Bumblefrost muttered crossly. "We have no idea what a flea-ridden *neighborhood* is, or an *alley*, whatever in StarClan's name—"

Cosmo's tail twitched and he flattened his ears. "It's not *my* fault you

don't know the talk around here. *I've* lived here my whole life, and —"

"Oh that's sure something to be proud of," Bumblefrost muttered sarcastically.

Cosmo bristled. "Do you want help or not?" He pointed his tail toward Pansy, Hazel, and River. "You don't seem to mind *them* !" he hissed at Bumblefrost.

"That's because they don't lead us to some foreign place that reeks of Twolegs and their rubbish. *They* know their way around the Twolegplace, *safely* ," Bumblefrost growled, narrowing his eyes. Whispersong put her tail on his back in warning, her eyes wide, but Bumblefrost ranted on. "You don't even know of anything safe two fox-lengths from your den!"

Echoheart widened her eyes. She couldn't believe that he was arguing with this cat; Cosmo was just trying to help them!

Cosmo curled his lip. "I gave you food and shelter, and are you grateful? No, you're not. Cats these days don't know *anything* about respect!"

"I *am* grateful for your shelter, but not for you trying to lead us into a trap. And this is the first time I've ever been grateful to a *kittypet* ," Bumblefrost snarled bitterly, claws flexing.

"*What* did you call me?" Cosmo growled, eyes blazing.

"A *kittypet* ," Bumblefrost spat. "And a big, fat, lazy one, too."

"How *dare* you—" Cosmo hissed, back arched.

Whispersong shoved between Bumblefrost and Cosmo. "What in the name of StarClan are you thinking?" she hissed to Bumblefrost. "He's trying to help!"

"By leading us into a *trap* ? For all we know, there are rats, or dogs, or other cats in there!" Bumblefrost growled, glaring at Cosmo.

"He does have a point," Echoheart stepped forward. "We should go

around."

"I agree," Hazel meowed, and Echoheart turned to look at the three kittypets, who had stayed silent throughout the whole argument.

"Yes," Pansy nodded. "We should go back and head another way."

Bumblefrost grunted. He shook head, murmuring a hasty apology to Whispersong, who flicked her tail crossly and nodded curtly.

River nodded. "Yes, Cosmo, can you lead us around?"

Cosmo looked uncertain, tail twitching in what Echoheart thought was fear. "I... I can't."

"Can't?" asked Whispersong in confusion. "Why not?"

"There's... well—" he cut off, glancing over his shoulder in worry.

River looked around the group of cats. "Cosmo, it was nice of you to want to lead us out of your neighborhood, but if you can't, we can get there by ourselves; it's no worry."

Cosmo opened his mouth to speak but was cut off by Bumblefrost. "What's that *smell* ?"

Echoheart sniffed the air, catching a scent on a breeze blowing across the Thunderpath and from the alley. A horrible stench reached Echoheart, and she felt her neck fur rising.

Bumblefrost's fur began to bristle. "It... It smells like cats. And crow-food."

Every cat looked around in uncertainty. Cosmo, however, had grown rigid, his eyes widened in terror. Echoheart's stomach lurched at Cosmo's expression.

Clearly the kittypet recognized the scent.

Chapter 14

Echoheart followed Cosmo's gaze down the dark pathway he'd called the alley. She narrowed her eyes, and felt an icy claw rake along her spine as she saw dozens of yellow and green eyes, reflecting the light of the sun. They were cats' eyes.

Suddenly something hard hit the ground with a hoarse gasp of pain. Echoheart whipped her head around in shock to see a dirty, ragged white tom pinning down Cosmo, his claws on the kittypet's throat. "Why have you brought them here?" he hissed. "Were you trying to recruit support? Were you planning to drive us out?" The claws dug deeper, tearing at the black and white fur around Cosmo's neck.

Echoheart stood rigid with horror, legs trembling. Her heart beat so loud against her chest she was sure that all of Twolegplace could hear it.

Then the white tom glanced up, claws still on Cosmo's throat. He glared at Echoheart, Whispersong, Bumblefrost, Hazel, Pansy, and River with anger. Then he turned to the alley, as if in a signal.

To Echoheart's horror, the other rogues had crept from the shadows, surrounding the traveling cats. River, Pansy, and Hazel lashed their tails and arched their backs, eyes widened in fear. Whispersong hissed loudly, her claws extended, while Bumblefrost bared his teeth, ready to pounce on the white tom holding down Cosmo.

"Take another pawstep and I'll have your belly torn inside out," snarled a dark brown and black tom, glaring at Bumblefrost. The DayClan warrior's eyes flashed with defiance and fear, but to Echoheart's relief, he didn't move.

Echoheart watched on helplessly as more and more cats emerged from the alley: toms, she-cats, and even smaller cats, some barely old enough to be apprentices. Their eyes burned with evil as they walked closer and closer, each taking their place around the six foreign cats.

"Now look what you've done," spat the white rogue, lip curled back to reveal sharp fangs.

"No..." begged Cosmo, his voice hardly understandable.

"I told you to never trespass on my territory! And you were going to, just now!"

"No, I wasn't!" Cosmo struggled under the tom's weight.

"You were leading them, those foreign cats, through my territory! I hate foreign cats, and you know that; cats that I don't know; cats that could be a threat to my cats, a threat to me!"

"I was going to lead them through the alley, like you... like you said to," Cosmo choked.

"Yes, but didn't you ever hear?" the rogue snarled. "The alleyway belongs to *me* now!"

There was shocked pause from Cosmo, then he spat, "No, it doesn't; it never has!"

"It does now! It's been mine for the past *half-moon* ! Didn't you ever wonder where Jay, Owen, and Robin have been? They *tried* to stop me; they gathered up some housecats against me, a weak attempt if anything. But it was too late. The alleyway was never theirs, and they died a foolish death when they could have just surrendered—"

"The alley was never *anyone's* ! It was for the use of all the cats in the neighborhood, you even agreed!" Cosmo cried out.

Echoheart wanted to jump forward and claw the eyes out of that cat, and she could tell that the others did too, but they were aware of the many eyes glaring at them from all around them. They were surrounded; they couldn't do anything. Echoheart gulped. They would be shredded to mousedust if they attacked the white tom.

"The alley was at one time everyone's. But I got bored with the little territory I had, and," he shrugged maliciously, "it's mine now."

"You! You're a—"

"What? I'm a what?" he snarled, teeth bared. "You know you'll never be able to stand up to me. I told you... I told you to either stay with your stupid housefolk, join me, or die. But you obviously don't seem to know that I mean every word I say. You didn't do what you were told, and now you're going to die, Cosmo."

Cosmo gulped, eyes wide in terror. "No..."

Echoheart's stomach twisted in terror. *What are we going to do?*

"I'm in power here. My cats and I have been thriving, growing with new fighters everyday; you should know not to mess with me."

"We can't just let him die!" Whispersong hissed next to Echoheart, brown eyes huge.

Bumblefrost and River shared terrified glances.

"Take a pawstep and you will *all* be shredded," spat a brown tabby tom nearest to Bumblefrost and River.

Bumblefrost shrank back towards Whispersong, ears flattened in frustration and terror.

Cosmo was spitting in disgust. "You're nothing more than a murderer!"

"Oh I'm more than anything you'll ever be, you flea-ridden pest! I hope you regret ever taking a pawstep near me and my cats," the white tom spat at Cosmo, claws tearing deeper.

Cosmo desperately tried to speak, but blood was gurgling up from his mouth. The white rogue tightened his claw-grip around the Cosmo's throat, blood gushing from the wound. Cosmo cried out in pain, but all that escaped was a choking gurgle, and Ecohoheart winced as the white tom bent down and sunk his teeth into Cosmo's throat, cutting off the innocent kittypet's cry of mercy.

He murdered in cold blood. I don't think even Rainstar *would do such a thing!* Echoheart thought with disgust and horror.

The white tom stepped off of Cosmo and spat crimson blood onto

the grass. He eyed Cosmo's limp body with hatred, then turned and walked around the six traveling cats, glaring at them. His eyes were narrowed black slits that made Echoheart tremble. Bumblefrost moved closer to Whispersong, curling his lip at the rogue when he passed.

StarClan help us! Echoheart wailed, heart thumping in her throat.

"Since your *friend* ," the rogue spat, "didn't tell me the truth, I'm giving you the chance to." The tom's eyes narrowed, smoldering with anger. "If you don't, you saw what will happen."

Echoheart's legs threatened to collapse beneath her. Pansy and Hazel moved closer to River, and Bumblefrost stood protectively in front of Whispersong.

"What, I repeat," the tom growled, "are you doing here, in my territory?"

No one answered. Echoheart felt her throat tighten in fear.

"WELL?" he demanded, anger growing like thorns in his voice.

Pansy cleared her throat, "Um," she coughed, her body shaking. "C-Cosmo was sh-showing us the best way out of the c-city."

"Oh, was he now?" the white tom growled in a chillingly calm voice, his deep laugh crackling like thunder.

One of the cats snorted: a dark orange tabby she-cat with battle scars lining her entire body. "Kill her, Poison."

Poison narrowed his eyes and twitched his dirty white tail.

Echoheart gulped.

Then he whipped his head around at Pansy, spitting in her face. "Liar!" He lashed out with his claws, sending Pansy crashing to the ground. She let out a faint squeak, and River rushed toward his sister. The other rogues surrounding them snickered.

"Back away," snarled the white tom, stepping between River and

Pansy.

"Make me," River spat on his paws.

Poison narrowed his eyes, then flashed a glance at Pansy's twitching body. "Kill her," he ordered his cats.

"No!" shrieked Hazel, leaping at Poison.

He fell over in surprise, and the wave of cats raced forward toward the fallen Pansy, bloodlust in their dark eyes. Bumblefrost let out a yowl and launched himself at the mass of rogues. Whispersong leapt after him, and Echoheart followed. She threw herself at a small red she-cat, easily tossing her aside. Echoheart turned to a large gray and white tom and sank her teeth into his leg. He whipped around and slammed down on top of her, claws raking across her head. Echoheart rolled over and kicked, but he was faster. The tom was soon on top of her, and Echoheart desperately pummeled his stomach with her hind claws, twisting and turning as he tried to claw back at her. She pushed him off with a huff, feeling the weight lift. To her surprise he fell over and stumbled away, hunched over. He met her narrowed eyes, then fled into the bushes.

Echoheart scrambled to her paws. These cats may have looked vicious, but they were easy to beat. They knew only basic fighting moves that Echoheart had known since she was a young apprentice. Slight hope filled her chest. Maybe these rogues could be beaten!

She glanced around her and saw River and Hazel struggling to ward off the hoard of approaching cats, on their way toward Pansy. Just to the left, Bumblefrost was rolling on the Thunderpath, the cats' leader in his clutches. Echoheart glanced at her sister, who was racing to help Bumblefrost, but she was pulled down by another cat; a tortoiseshell she-cat. She turned and pushed her away, clawing her flank. The she-cat hissed and leapt at Whispersong, but Whispersong dodged her and easily sent her fleeing into the alley again.

Echoheart felt her ear suddenly sting like fire, and she let out a growl of pain. She turned around just as two large tabbies launched at her. Echoheart reared onto her hind legs and swiped at one of

their heads, sending blood flying. The other one skidded to a halt, eyes widened.

"This is for Cosmo!" she shrieked. *Even though I didn't know him*, she added to herself, flinging her body at the rogue and tearing at her fur. The rogue cried out, trying to claw at Echoheart's eyes. Echoheart ducked, narrowly missing a claw swipe to the nose. She leapt backward, and her opponent stumbled to the ground. Echoheart held her down with her claws, digging them deep into her flesh. "Don't ever think you can mess with us!" Echoheart spat. The she-cat stared rebelliously into her eyes, but when Echoheart let her go, she fled into the alley, a few other cats following her.

Echoheart looked around, sides heaving, and saw cat bodies lying limply on the ground, and her heart skipped a beat. A wave of relief washed over her when she realized they were all rogues. *The others must be aiming to kill*, Echoheart realized with horror. She'd never killed a cat before, and even though these cats were evil, she couldn't bear the thought of ending some cat's life.

"What do you think you're doing?" hissed a voice behind Echoheart. Before she could turn around, she found herself on the ground, the breath knocked out of her. Echoheart gasped for breath, and saw a large gray tom standing over her, scars lining his face and his ears torn to pieces. His fur was matted and filled with dust and blood, and his teeth were dark yellow, reeking of crow-food. Echoheart's eyes widened and she tried to shove him off.

"Oh, you won't be able to get rid of me that easily," he sneered, his scarred eye gleaming dark red. His mouth twisted into a snarl and he spat, "You are going to die! I am one of Poison's best guards! I've been trained to fight!"

"More like you've been trained to kill, you cold-blooded piece of fox-dung!" Echoheart spat, shoving at the tom's stomach with her claws. A thought struck her mind; these cats had only learned killing moves. They were only trained to kill! That meant they didn't know the other fighting techniques that Clan cats used all the time. Hope filled Echoheart's body and she lashed out with her front paw, claws unsheathed, and raked them across his muzzle.

The tom flinched and growled in pain, squinting as blood splattered across his face. Echoheart took that chance to escape, and raced around behind him. The tom swiveled his ears and turned as Echoheart leapt at him. He fell over, eyes filled with fear. Echoheart rolled over and over with him, clawing at any part of fur she could get her claws in. He tore at her flank and she bit his leg.

He got up and circled around her, glaring at her through his dark eyes. Echoheart crouched down, tail lashing, and hissed. She sat up slowly on her hind legs and lashed out with her foreclaws, narrowly missing his eye. They both stood on their back legs, swiping at each other. Echoheart hit him, and he lost his balance. Then she shoved him to the ground and dug her claws into his shoulder. He screeched in agony, then lunged at her throat, jaws locking on her neck. Echoheart grew stiff with shock, and then her adrenaline kicked in. She shoved his head away with her back legs, feeling her fur tear with him. She ignored the searing pain and the warm stickiness of blood on her neck and clawed at his upturned belly, ready to end their battle once and for all. She sank her claws deeper and felt him lash out at her, tearing at her forelegs. She made one final lunge and sank her teeth into his throat, feeling the life ebb away from his body. Echoheart stepped back, blood pooling around her. She exhaled unevenly, exhaustion and shock filling her body.

Echoheart's eyes widened as the realization hit her. She stared at the mangled gray tom. He was the first cat she'd ever killed.

A screech of fury snapped Echoheart back into her senses. Her eyes darted across the scene of blood and dead bodies, and she saw Bumblefrost, green eyes burning with fury. He lunged at Poison and clawed at his throat. Poison lashed back, but Bumblefrost was faster. He reared on his hind legs then slammed down on Poison's back.

Whispersong was a little to the left, dodging three oncoming cats, all fighting to kill. Whispersong rolled with one while the other two circled around them, waiting for Whispersong to let go so she couldn't escape and would be an easier kill.

Echoheart felt anger surge through her pelt and she raced to her sister's side, bowling over one of the other cats circling her sister.

They rolled and clawed, and thumped onto the hard gravel Thunderpath. The rogue's grasp loosened and Echoheart flung her against the hard gravel, hearing her gasp as the breath was knocked out of her. Echoheart leapt; her paws met fur, and the two tore at each other, twisting and biting. Echoheart finally grasped the she-cat's throat with her foreclaws, blood staining the Thunderpath. The rogue fell limp and Echoheart felt an emptiness creeping along her spine.

Echoheart turned back to her sister. Whispersong lifted her jaws off of the other dead rogue, sides heaving. *The third must have already fled*, Echoheart realized with numb relief. She nodded at Whispersong, and together they ran to drive off the remaining few cats.

Suddenly a loud rumbling filled the air and Echoheart looked around frantically. Then she saw it. Two large monsters were racing along the Thunderpath, right toward the battle scene.

His cats widened their eyes at the passing monster and fled for the ally, ignoring their leader, trapped underneath Bumblefrost's grip. "Don't run, you cowards!" snarled Poison, clawing viciously at Bumblefrost.

"No!" the DayClan warrior growled. "I am not letting you get away so easily!"

A look of fear filled Poison's eyes for a heartbeat, then he kicked and fought. But Bumblefrost was a trained fighter, and Poison couldn't get away.

The monsters passed, swerving around the cats and narrowly missing the few bodies that lay on the Thunderpath.

A loud snarl echoed in the air ominously once the monsters had passed. Bumblefrost was glaring at the white tom under his claws, jaws parted in a hiss of pure hatred and disgust.

Poison let out a furious snarl. "If you don't let me up this instant, I will hunt you down and kill every last cat that tries to protect you; I will find y—"

"Listen up, you fox-heart. I'm a *warrior*. I train to fight to protect my Clan, not fight to kill for pleasure, like you dung-faces do," Bumblefrost spat, digging his claws into the rogue's sides and shoving his muzzle up to the white tom's nose. "Don't you ever mess with my warriors, or any of these kittypets ever again. You understand?" Bumblefrost growled. When Poison didn't answer, Bumblefrost sank his claws deeper. "Understand?" Poison nodded weakly and reluctantly, the dark fire still burning in his eyes. Bumblefrost clawed one last time into Poison's flank and shoved him away.

"And *stay* away!" shouted River, fur bristling.

Whispersong ran up to Bumblefrost and rubbed her face into his blood-matted fur. Bumblefrost took a deep breath, sides heaving, and watched as Poison and the last of his followers disappeared through the dark alley. Bumblefrost turned and licked Whispersong's head. Echoheart shakily got to her paws and walked over to them, leaning against Whispersong. The three sat side by side, catching their breath.

"NO!"

Echoheart whipped her head around in worry. It was River's voice. Were there more rogues attacking?

But it wasn't a warning call. It was a cry of desperation. Echoheart's throat tightened in horror as she saw what River had cried out for.

Hazel lay limply on her side, her once beautiful gray-brown tabby pelt now dark crimson. Dried blood was matted in her fur, and fresh blood was dripping from her stomach wound.

Pansy crouched over her sister, tears streaming onto the ground.

Echoheart, Whispersong, and Bumblefrost slowly joined them, sitting beside Pansy and River. Cosmo's body lay a fox-length away, along with the few rogues that they'd killed.

Suddenly Hazel's eyes blinked open, weak with confusion.

"Hazel?" Pansy choked back tears. "You're alright," she murmured.

"No... no I'm not," Hazel rasped.

"I'm so sorry. This is all my fault," Bumblefrost meowed quietly, bowing his head. Every cat turned to him in surprise. "If I hadn't argued with Cosmo... and instead suggested going around, then—"

"It's not... not your fault," Hazel coughed. "If we had went around, we'd still have been in Poison's territory, according to him anyway. We fought for a good... a good cause."

"There shouldn't have been a cause," muttered Bumblefrost, eyes full of guilt.

"Those rogues have been haunting these kittypets for seasons upon seasons," River pointed out. "At least... they're gone now."

Pansy shook her head. "It wasn't *our* problem though. Hazel is... hurt... now because of it."

"No cat should have died," Bumblefrost sighed.

"Cosmo's death wasn't your fault," Whispersong soothed.

He shook his head in despair. "Oh, but it was."

Hazel coughed again, spurting out droplets of blood.

"Hazel! River exclaimed in horror.

"Please, Hazel! Hang on!" Pansy ran back and forth, eyes wide, trying to find something to help her suffering sister.

"Help her!" River turned to Whispersong. "You know about herbs!"

Whispersong widened her eyes. "We're in T-Twolegplace. There aren't any herbs here." She stared at the ground and avoided River's gaze, looking guilty. "And I can't remember anything now," she added miserably, but only Echoheart heard her.

"I don't regret anything," Hazel meowed weakly, turning to her brother and sister. "I've lived a good life, and I've traveled so far and met so many cats along the way."

"But your life isn't over yet!" Pansy protested, tears streaming.

"Don't forget everything we've done together," Hazel rasped, coughing viciously.

River closed his eyes, his tail resting on Hazel's flank.

"How could I forget?" Pansy choked. Hazel smiled weakly.

Echoheart bowed her head as Hazel let out one last exhale, then lay still, eyes glazed.

So many deaths, and for what purpose? Cosmo, Hazel, and countless rogues had needlessly died today, and Echoheart had helped contribute; she'd killed two of them. Echoheart closed her eyes and sighed sadly.

What have we done?

Echoheart felt a tear slide down her cheek and watched as it splashed onto a patch of grass stained with dried blood.

Why did you bring us here? she asked StarClan despairingly.

Chapter 15

Hailstorm shook his head to clear away the weariness. He'd nearly fallen asleep on his paws, again. He was *supposed* to be on watch with Sunfur and keeping guard over the camp for the night, but he kept dozing off.

Sunfur looked at him, her eyes full of amusement. "I think you should rest, Hailstorm."

Hailstorm shook his head. "I can't, I should be on guard with you. What kind of warrior am I if I can't keep watch over our camp?"

"No cat blames you for being tired," Sunfur meowed gently, and Hailstorm turned back to look at the senior warrior. "After all, you did go hunting for the Clan all day."

Hailstorm nodded. He'd led a hunting patrol today, taking Raypaw, Clovertail, and Twigfoot with him, and together they'd brought back plenty of prey to feed the Clan. But they hadn't come back until dusk, so now Hailstorm was exhausted. He'd been ready to curl up on his moss and sleep when Eveningstar had asked if he and Sunfur would keep watch for the night. Sunfur had agreed immediately, and Hailstorm had, too, but he had felt regret swimming in his thoughts as he realized that he wouldn't be able to sleep, like he'd wanted to.

"I'm fine on my own, Hailstorm," Sunfur insisted. "You need to sleep."

Hailstorm looked at Sunfur. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. "Yes, now go get some rest."

"Thank you, Sunfur," Hailstorm meowed gratefully at the she-cat. Sunfur dipped her head, then turned back to facing the bramble

barrier, her orange-brown ears twitching, alert for any amiss sounds.

Hailstorm looked up at the sky, twinkling with stars. The moon, slowly growing larger from the half-moon that it was a few nights ago, would soon be full again. Hailstorm looked back down and walked wearily back toward the warriors' den, heading through the clearing. The night was silent except for the gentle breeze in the trees above him.

As he passed the medicine cats den, however, he heard a distressed whimper, and he strained his ears, picking it up as Yellowpaw's. "...had it three times now!" she was wailing.

Hailstorm heard the sympathetic voice of Goldheart inside the den, but he couldn't make out what the medicine cat had said. Hailstorm glanced around him, then quietly crept closer to the medicine cats den, guilt pricking his spine as he realized that he was eavesdropping on the two medicine cats. But curiosity pulled him forward, along with worry for his sister, whose troubled voice filled the stone den.

"It doesn't matter that you didn't tell me before. What is it?" Goldheart sounded worried.

"I... I have had the same dream, three times," Yellowpaw began, lowering her voice. Hailstorm angled his ears closer, listening intently as his sister continued. "I had it at the Moonfall, then yesterday, and now earlier tonight. I wanted to figure out what it meant on my own..." she trailed off. Then her voice raised again. "I thought I could, but now I've been having it over again, and, well, I think it's going to come true... It seemed like the kind of dream that was a warning."

"Tell me what it is, and I can try and help you figure it out," Goldheart prompted.

"Okay," Hailstorm heard Yellowpaw whisper. "It was dark, darker than normal. It was night, but it felt like not even the moonlight or starlight had reached where I was. Well, we were all standing in a circle, and—"

"We?" asked Goldheart, voicing Hailstorm's thoughts aloud.

"DawnClan, though I think another Clan was there too, but I couldn't pinpoint their scent."

A silence followed, and Hailstorm twitched his ears.

"Anyway," Yellowpaw continued, her voice faltering. "We were all encircling a pile of sticks, but they weren't just any sticks, they were shaped like paws, cat paws, at the ends."

Hailstorm narrowed his eyes in confusion. What in the name of StarClan does it mean? he wondered, feeling guilt prick his fur once again as thought about how this was medicine cat business, not a warrior's, and certainly not his.

Goldheart seemed to be confused too, for he asked, "What?"

Yellowpaw continued describing her dream, her voice lowering as she went on. "All of DawnClan was grieving over the broken sticks. Then suddenly, a light rose up from our circle of cats. I think it was the sun casting light on our darkness. It felt like our Clan was safe again, and the sun would protect us. I don't know what it could possibly mean," Yellowpaw murmured.

Goldheart soothed her. "It's alright. We'll figure it out."

"But what if it's not alright?" Yellowpaw fretted.

"It will be," insisted the medicine cat. "Even though there was a darkness in your dream, the sun at the end signified that DawnClan would be taken care of, and filled with light again. Don't worry."

"I can't worry, for the sake of the Clan," Hailstorm heard his sister declare, determination filling her voice. "I'm a medicine cat; I must be strong for them." She sounded wiser than Hailstorm had ever heard her, putting her Clan first.

"That's the spirit," Goldheart meowed quietly. "Now, we'd better get back to bed."

A few quiet murmurs followed this, and Hailstorm slowly crept

back to the warriors' den, dazed. What had Yellowpaw's dream meant? It had seemed full of darkness and danger. And even though all that DawnClan had been grieving about in his sister's dream was some broken sticks, Hailstorm knew it signified *something*.

Hailstorm sighed as a shudder passed through him. He just hoped that DawnClan would pull through whatever Yellowpaw's dream warned of.

* * *

Hailstorm trudged through the forest, his mind still on Yellowpaw's dream; it'd been bothering him all morning, ever since he woke up.

"Hurry up!"

Hailstorm glanced ahead at Raypaw, who was looking over his shoulder in annoyance as Hailstorm padded after him. Twigfoot was leading a hunting patrol and had asked Hailstorm to go out with Raypaw for the day, because he wanted him to practice his fighting moves before having an assessment. The other warriors around camp were busy on patrols or getting moss or watching kits, so Twigfoot had asked Hailstorm, knowing he and Raypaw were good friends. Hailstorm had agreed quickly, eager to spend time with his friend, and possibly get practice for when he would have his own apprentice.

Raypaw hadn't exactly been enthusiastic when Twigfoot had told him; he'd lashed his tail and scowled at the ground. Hailstorm could tell that Raypaw disliked the fact that he needed Hailstorm to watch him, and Hailstorm could also tell that Raypaw felt that he could be trusted to go out of camp by himself; he'd been in a bad and bossy mood ever since they had left camp.

Even though Hailstorm viewed Raypaw as his friend and his equal, he was still was an apprentice, and Twigfoot had ordered him to listen to Hailstorm, which had really annoyed Raypaw.

"Are you a slug?" asked Raypaw impatiently. "It'll take us until sunset to get to the meadow at this pace!"

"We'll get there at sunset if you keep this mood up," Hailstorm grumbled to himself.

"Now, let's practice fighting. I want to be prepared to show Twigfoot tomorrow when he takes me out again; he said that I'd have my assessment soon. I don't want to mess anything up." Raypaw raised his head proudly.

The two soon reached the meadow, the warm sunlight glistening off the tom's pelts.

"You and I will practice fighting; attack me," he ordered, his bad mood still prevalent in his tone.

"Who's the warrior?" asked Hailstorm in annoyance. "I'll decide what we do."

Raypaw rolled his eyes in exasperation. "I'm only a few moons younger than you."

"But I'm a warrior," Hailstorm retorted. "You're still an apprentice."

"But I'm bigger than you," Raypaw pointed out, a growled laced in his voice.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Hailstorm snorted. "Bronzepelt is bigger than Eveningstar, but Eveningstar is still his leader."

"So?"

"So, just because you're bigger doesn't mean you get to boss me around. *You're* the apprentice, and *I'm* the warrior. And Twigfoot told you that I would be watching you. Disobeying me would be disobeying your mentor *and* your deputy."

Raypaw rolled his eyes. "Like I don't know that. Anyway, Twigfoot told you to practice fighting moves with me." He narrowed his eyes. "I don't see you doing that."

"Well, if you hadn't acted like such a bossy-furball, then we could be training. But you had to interfere and act like you're the leader,"

Hailstorm meowed impatiently.

"I did not. Now, can we just drop it and do the practice-fighting like Twigfoot told us to?"

Hailstorm rolled his eyes. He couldn't believe Raypaw was being so tempered and bossy. He'd changed quite a bit since he was first apprenticed: bigger, stronger, and much more stubborn. "Fine," Hailstorm huffed at last, unable to believe that he was letting an apprentice tell him what to do.

"Are you afraid?" taunted Raypaw. "Worried that you might be beaten by an apprentice?"

"It doesn't matter," growled Hailstorm, tired of Raypaw's bossy attitude. "We'll practice fighting. *No* claws. This is like any regular fighting match that you'd do during training."

"I'm not a kit; I know that," Raypaw snapped, his voice filled with rising impatience.

"We'll see who's the kit," Hailstorm muttered, lowering to the ground and lashing his tail. At the same heartbeat, Raypaw launched himself at Hailstorm, taking the older tom by surprise. Hailstorm rolled over, hissing. "I never said go!"

"A warrior must be ready for anything," Raypaw jeered, pulling Hailstorm to the ground.

Raypaw was stronger than Hailstorm thought. He wasn't the young cat shyly asking him to play anymore; he was a full-grown tom, moons of training now behind him.

Raypaw shoved his large paws on Hailstorm's flank, and Hailstorm felt his legs give way beneath him. He collapsed to the ground.

You're a warrior, you idiot! Hailstorm growled to himself as he hit the grass. *Where are the battle skills Prairiefoot taught you?*

Hailstorm rolled onto his back, leaving his upturned belly exposed. Raypaw leapt at him, but this time, he was ready. Hailstorm rolled out of the way, quickly on his paws again. Raypaw had lost his

balance, and Hailstorm launched himself at his Clanmate. Raypaw turned his head as he was bowled over, and Hailstorm nipped at his forelegs. Raypaw twisted under Hailstorm's firm grip, turning around to kick at Hailstorm's muzzle. Hailstorm closed his eyes as Raypaw's paws landed a blow on his chin. Raypaw took that heartbeat to squeeze out from under Hailstorm, then he pushed the older warrior over. Hailstorm stumbled and fell under Raypaw's weight, then he turned his head to nip at the apprentice's ears. Raypaw dodged, placing his paws on Hailstorm's shoulders. Hailstorm tried to jerk Raypaw off, but his large orange paws firmly kept Hailstorm pinned to the ground.

"Now who's the kit?" Raypaw taunted.

Hailstorm growled, jerking his legs hard at Raypaw's underbelly, but the apprentice didn't move.

"Give up?" Raypaw scoffed, pushing harder into Hailstorm's shoulders.

"No," Hailstorm hissed, kicking Raypaw with his back paws again. But Raypaw still didn't budge. Hailstorm squirmed and struggled beneath the larger cat's weight, surprised at how big Raypaw had actually grown.

"I win," Raypaw declared, his sides heaving.

Hailstorm shook his head, and lashed out to bite Raypaw's shoulder, but Raypaw dodged easily.

"Looks like your father taught me some lessons that he never taught you," Raypaw taunted, his amber eyes full of pride.

"Parents can't mentor their own kits." Hailstorm rolled his eyes. "So therefore Twigfoot couldn't have taught me all my fighting skills."

"I *know* that. Honestly, Hailstorm, when are you going to realize I'm not a kit anymore?" Raypaw snorted, still easily keeping Hailstorm pinned to the ground.

Hailstorm felt a slight twinge of guilt. It was true. He'd treated Raypaw like a kit a lot lately; he was only a few moons younger

than him. "Fine, fine," muttered Hailstorm. "You win."

"Told you so." Raypaw's tail shot up triumphantly, and he let go of Hailstorm.

Hailstorm grunted, shaking his black and white pelt free of debris.

"Now, since I won," Raypaw meowed indignantly. "I'll decide what we do for the rest of the training."

"Okay, okay," Hailstorm meowed, pushing away Raypaw's attitude. "What are we going to do then?"

"I've got ideas," Raypaw meowed happily, turning around and trotting through the meadow without even checking to see if Hailstorm was following him. Hailstorm blinked in surprise, staring at Raypaw. He shook his head in amusement, then followed his Clanmate downstream.

When they got back to camp after a long day of hunting, fighting, and tracking, Hailstorm told Twigfoot about Raypaw's successes. Twigfoot had nodded approvingly, promising to tell Raypaw that he'd have his assessment soon.

"What about traveling to the Moonfall?" Hailstorm had asked.

"I was thinking about going tomorrow night," Twigfoot replied. "Goldheart said that he wanted to speak with StarClan, and that he couldn't wait until the next half-moon."

"What's wrong?" Hailstorm had asked worriedly.

"He said it was nothing urgent. He just wanted to make sure of something."

Hailstorm wasn't so sure. He had a feeling Goldheart was going because of Yellowpaw's dream, which she had apparently had three times since the last half-moon, as Hailstorm had overheard. He still felt guilty that he'd hidden and listened to the medicine cats' conversation, and he tried not to show worry when Twigfoot kept reassuring him that Goldheart had said that there was nothing to worry about. But Hailstorm had a feeling that Yellowpaw's dream

meant something, and that darkness was on its way, as his sister had described.

Was it the same danger Whispersong and Echoheart had dreamt about? Hailstorm suddenly thought, heart skipping a beat. He hoped not. That would mean that Echoheart and Whispersong wouldn't be here to help them through with it, and the two of them knew the most about it, as Goldheart had said, since they'd both had dreams from StarClan.

Hailstorm swallowed nervously; he couldn't stop thinking about it, even as he sat beside his sister and mother, who were happily sharing the success of their hunting patrol.

"The prey was running as well as I've ever seen it for green-leaf," Moonshine purred.

Clovertail nodded. "You should have been there, Hailstorm," she meowed happily. "It was amazing! And now the fresh-kill pile is restocked high!"

Hailstorm blinked. "That's great," he meowed distractedly, faking his enthusiasm as his thoughts wandered from Yellowpaw's dream to the danger and to Echoheart. Pain stabbed his heart. Even though it had just been over a half-moon since she and Whispersong had left, it felt like seasons. What had happened to them? Where were they now? Hailstorm looked up at the dark blue sky, clear of clouds. The sun was sinking into the horizon, casting long shadows over the camp. Would he ever see Echoheart again? The thought of her never coming back clawed his heart.

He held onto Sunfur's words every time these thoughts disturbed him, whenever he felt like life couldn't go on without Echoheart. *'If StarClan sent them, StarClan will bring them back'*.

"Hailstorm?" Hailstorm jerked his thoughts away and turned around. Clovertail was staring at him, her green eyes round with sympathy. Moonshine had already left to the warriors' den, and Clovertail looked like she was about to follow her. "Are you alright?"

Hailstorm nodded. "I'm fine."

"What's bothering you?" his sister murmured.

"I'm fine, really. My mind just started wandering," he persisted.

"Alright," Clovertail meowed quietly. Then she flicked her tail over his ears and meowed, "Don't stay out too long; the sun's gone down."

Hailstorm smiled weakly and nodded. Clovertail's footsteps faded away as she disappeared inside the warriors' den behind Sparrowtail and Moonshine.

Suddenly something cannoned into Hailstorm's right flank, and he lost his balance. He jerked his head around in surprise and saw Pinekit staring up at him, wobbling and shaking his dark brown head. "Sorry, Hailstorm," he squeaked. "I... I didn't see you there."

Hailstorm purred in amusement and smiled. "It's fine," he assured the young kit.

"Come find me already!" yowled a voice over by the nursery. It was Rosekit's.

Pinekit lowered his head. "I can never find her," he muttered.

Hailstorm leaned down and whispered, "Try and track her with your nose instead of just using your eyes. It makes finding things a whole lot easier. And it'll be great practice for when you're an apprentice."

Pinekit's eyes lit up. "Okay!" Then he lowered his head to the ground and sniffed the grass, padding slowly toward the patch of ferns and grass near the nursery. He then ran toward Rosekit's hiding place and looked around, his dark brown ears swiveling. A flash of cream fur caught Hailstorm's eyes and Pinekit leapt forward, his tail shooting straight up in excitement. The small brown tabby tom-kit lowered down and crept forward, haunches raised in a way that was most unlike the hunting crouch, which caused Hailstorm to laugh and remember the time when he was that age. Pinekit stopped and then launched himself at a patch of

ivy beside the nursery and declared proudly, "Found you!"

Rosekit stepped out of her hiding place and shook off her pelt. "Now let's find Needlekit!"

"Bet you he went to hide behind Father," Pinekit meowed, turning to lick his shoulder.

"Last one to find him is crowfood!" Rosekit declared, racing across the camp. Pinekit burst into protest and ran after his sister, hard on her trail, and dodged Prairiefoot, Sparktail, and Meadowheart on the way.

Hailstorm purred in amusement as he watched the two kits disappear behind the fresh-kill log. He sighed, wishing he was still a kit. He missed that carefree life, when all that they were concerned with was when they'd be able to play again, not dangers or darkness or ominous dreams. Hailstorm shook his head. What was he thinking? He loved being a warrior! Loved it with every breath he took, with every piece of prey brought back for the Clan. He wouldn't change anything for the world!

Hailstorm got to his paws and made his way across the clearing to the warriors' den, the gray light of twilight fading into the black of night. The moon and stars shone brightly above, and Hailstorm curled up beside Clovertail, her warm black fur pressed against his. He faintly heard Twigfoot and Rustypelt talking outside the den, but the noise faded out as his breathing steadied and he drifted to sleep.

Chapter 16

The sun shone straight above Hailstorm's head the next day as he watched Raypaw talking to Sagetail and Twigfoot excitedly. Lilackit and Cherrykit sat beside Sagetail, batting at each other playfully. The two sure had grown in the half-moon since they'd been born. They had first set paw out of the nursery this morning, given a tour by Rosekit, Pinekit, and Needlekit.

Goldheart emerged from the den and padded toward Raypaw, Yellowpaw behind him; Raypaw was leaving for the traditional trip to the Moonfall that all apprentices made before being named warriors. Goldheart was giving herbs to the leaving cats, including himself. He, Raypaw, and Bronzepelt were the three cats making the journey.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Twigfoot promised his apprentice. "And then we'll decide when your assessment will be."

"Alright," Raypaw meowed excitedly, his paws kneading the ground.

Twigfoot smiled and batted Raypaw's ear in affection. "Be safe."

"We will," Raypaw promised.

Hailstorm padded up to Raypaw. "Goodbye," he meowed.

Raypaw rolled his eyes. "We'll be back, don't worry."

"I'm not worried," Hailstorm meowed.

Eveningstar jumped down from the High-stone and padded swiftly up to Goldheart. "Safe travels," he meowed.

"Thank you, Eveningstar." Goldheart dipped his head. "We'll be back before you know it."

Eveningstar leaned closer. "Is everything alright?" he whispered quietly, but Hailstorm overheard. "I mean, because you need to

speak with StarClan. It sounded urgent."

"It's fine," Goldheart flicked his golden-tabby tail. "I just need to confirm something."

"Alright." Eveningstar nodded, looking somewhat convinced. Hailstorm knew that he was just worried about the safety of the Clan and wanted to make sure nothing was threatening them. But Hailstorm also knew that Goldheart wouldn't tell Eveningstar anything without knowing everything; he didn't want to cause fear throughout the Clan when it wasn't necessary.

Bronzepelt finished up his herbs, while Raypaw stared at his in disgust. Hailstorm remembered all too clearly what they tasted like from his own trip to the Moonfall, and held back a gag of revolt.

"Come on, Raypaw," Yellowpaw insisted impatiently. "They're just herbs."

Raypaw wrinkled up his nose, then took a deep breath, then he slowly lowered his head and lapped up the mixture of leaves. He screwed his eyes shut and chewed. Then he stuck out his tongue. "Yuck!" he spat.

"What?" squeaked Lilackit, peering at her older brother from behind Sagetail with wide yellow eyes.

"Herbs," muttered Raypaw bitterly.

"Eww!" Cherrykit exclaimed, her tiny pink nose wrinkled.

Lilackit got up and sprang forward, pushing Cherrykit over. The small red she-kit let out a squeal, and the two sisters tussled in the dirt, rolling in circles.

"Go play in the clearing," meowed Sagetail. "You're getting in the way. You don't want to play near those herbs, right?" The two young kits shook their heads wildly, then turned tail clumsily and raced after each other, play fighting their way into the clearing.

"Okay, we're ready." Hailstorm turned back to the cluster of warriors and saw Goldheart standing up, facing Raypaw and

Bronzepelt. Every cat meowed out their last farewells, then the three cats turned and left the camp. Hailstorm watched them go, Raypaw's orange tabby fur rippling with excitement. Goldheart took the lead, and the other two followed. Bronzepelt fell back to walk with his son, and soon all three disappeared behind the thick trees.

"Hailstorm." It was Eveningstar. "Can you lead the evening patrol at dusk tonight? Take Eaglefeather and Meadowheart with you?"

"Sure." Hailstorm felt honored to be chosen to lead the evening patrol, especially when there were so many more older and experienced warriors to pick. "I'll tell them," he promised, his tail swishing in pride.

"Thank you," the DawnClan leader meowed and dipped his head, then turned to Twigfoot and Sunfur across the clearing.

At dusk, Hailstorm called to Meadowheart and Eaglefeather, who were sharing a rabbit. The two warriors looked up and nodded, finishing up their last bite before joining Hailstorm beside the bramble barrier.

"Ready?" Hailstorm asked them.

They nodded, and Hailstorm turned, stepping outside of the camp. He walked proudly forward through the green forest, Eaglefeather and Meadowheart right beside him. They soon reached the stream as the sky's light faded, the orange clouds highlighting the darker sky.

"We should bring back some soaked moss for the kits," Meadowheart suggested.

"Aspenleaf took her kits to the stream earlier," Eaglefeather murmured.

"But Sagetail's kits aren't old enough to leave the camp yet, even for a drink," pointed out Meadowheart.

"Okay, we'll find some moss and soak it in the stream on our way back," Hailstorm meowed.

Eaglefeather and Meadowheart nodded, and soon the three were crossing the stream, carefully clawing across the damp bark of the log-bridge.

Hailstorm lead the patrol through the forest, which was turning gray in the twilight. He turned away from the setting sun, heading toward the NightClan border. Hailstorm closed his eyes as the warm breeze reached his black and white fur, warming him. He'd been used to the cold, bone-chilling wind of leaf-bare, and was glad that this new-leaf had brought warmth with it.

Soon the distant roaring of the monsters on the Thunderpath reached his ears, and, not much longer, its acrid tang hit his scent-glands, and Hailstorm wrinkled up his nose.

Suddenly Meadowheart stiffened. "Twolegs!" she exclaimed.

Hailstorm's spine bristled and he jerked his head to the left. In the grass ahead was a group of four Twolegs, two full-grown ones and two younger kits.

Eaglefeather hissed. "Why are they this deep into the forest? They should be in their Twolegplace!"

"I've never seen them here before," Meadowheart nodded in agreement.

"Where is the Twolegplace?" Hailstorm asked.

"Behind our territory, on the opposite border from the DayClan border," Eaglefeather whispered. "I've only been near it once when I was an apprentice."

"I've never been," Meadowheart murmured. "I've seen Twolegs in the forest before, but never this deep."

Hailstorm nodded. "Let's try and find out why they're here. I don't think they're here just for the fun of it."

"You never know," Eaglefeather shrugged. "Twolegs do the most mouse-brained things."

Hailstorm looked at Eaglefeather. "Let's check it out, just in case there is something we need to tell the Clan."

"Alright." Eaglefeather shrugged, nodding for Hailstorm to lead the way.

Hailstorm narrowed his eyes in determination, slowly creeping toward the Twolegs. He was careful not to step on any twigs or rustle any leaves, fearful that the Twolegs would see them and chase after them; Hailstorm didn't want them to find the camp. His mind flickered to Aspenleaf's and Sagetail's kits at camp, and he knew Twolegs caught and stole kits from kittypets, so why wouldn't they do the same for Clan kits?

"Look," Meadowheart breathed, her tail fluffing up.

Hailstorm turned and gasped. A large gray monster was on its side, scratched by the large pine tree it had hit. A path of flattened grass and plants came from the Thunderpath many fox-lengths away and the deep muddy tracks where the monster veered off the Thunderpath carved into the forest floor. Bushes and saplings had been snapped and lay flattened and dead on the ground.

"That's why the Twolegs are in the forest here," Eaglefeather hissed quietly. "Their monster tried to kill them."

A sudden anger bubbled inside Hailstorm. The careless monster not only led the Twolegs to the forest where the Clan cats lived, but it also destroyed many plants and new growth of new-leaf. The long path where the monster had fallen would be there for a while, and the broken saplings would never grow again.

"It probably scared all the prey from here to the Pointed Mountain!" Eaglefeather growled, lashing his bushy black and brown tail.

Hailstorm nodded, not taking his eyes from the scene.

The two Twoleg kits whimpered and sat close together, shivering, next to the two older ones. Hailstorm narrowed his eyes.

Suddenly a thundering sound filled the air, and a huge white monster appeared around the corner and stopped beside the four

Twolegs, who climbed inside the monster's belly. Then the large white monster sped off into the night, deserting the dead monster behind it.

"We should get going," Meadowheart meowed after the noise faded in the distance. "It's getting darker, and the Twolegs have left."

"But what about that dead monster?" Hailstorm wondered aloud.

Meadowheart sighed. "I don't know. We can't do anything about it. But at least it's dead; it can't wander into our camp now."

Hailstorm nodded, taking his eyes off the upturned, scarred monster. He crept away from the Thunderpath with the other two cats behind him, making sure to mark a few trees and bushes on the border before heading back into the forest.

When they could no longer see or hear the Thunderpath, Eaglefeather let out a long sigh of relief. "Thank StarClan that that wasn't too serious."

"And that the Twolegs didn't wander away from the Thunderpath and stray into the forest," Meadowheart pointed out.

Hailstorm nodded, leading the patrol toward the meadow. The trees thinned out again to reveal the black sky, while the bright stars twinkled and the moon climbed toward moonhigh.

When the three warriors finally stepped out into the meadow, the grass swaying in the breeze, Hailstorm stopped abruptly. A prick of apprehension raced along his spine.

"What is it?" asked Eaglefeather, sensing Hailstorm's fright.

"Something's not right," he murmured, feeling his fur bristle in fear. He sniffed the air around him and pricked his ears, but nothing unusual reached him. He narrowed his eyes, but saw nothing but grass and trees.

"It's too quiet," Meadowheart whispered, her tail bushing.

"Yes," Hailstorm breathed, his claws digging into the dirt. That was

it. It was way too quiet. Beside the distant gurgling of the river and the breeze in the grass, there were no sounds. No scuttling prey, no birds, no bats, just silence.

"Maybe the prey was frightened by the monster crash," Eaglefeather suggested.

"Maybe..." Hailstorm whispered, but somehow he was sure it wasn't that. Something was missing. Something that made being in the meadow normal. The three crept closer to the river, its wide banks wet with mud from the water that rushed rapidly over the rocks.

Meadowheart remarked the border, while Eaglefeather gazed around, his yellow-green eyes narrowed in worry.

"See anything?" Hailstorm asked the dark brown and black tom.

Eaglefeather shook his head. "Nothing," he whispered. "But now I see what you're talking about. Something's off, but I don't know what."

Meadowheart tilted her head as she finished remarking the patches of reeds and bushes beside the river, then she turned to them. "DayClan's scent isn't strong, at all."

Hailstorm pricked his ears and padded over to the river's edge. He sniffed the air and found a trace of DayClan's scent, but it was faint, too faint. "That's it," he whispered. "That's what felt off: DayClan's scent. It's missing."

"They haven't been here for the past quarter-moon at least, perhaps longer," Meadowheart murmured, her eyes narrowed in confusion as she sniffed the air.

Eaglefeather nodded, his tail lashing. "Those fox-hearts are probably too busy with the next plan of theirs," he suggested with a hiss.

"But DayClan is always the one to mark up their borders the strongest," meowed Meadowheart. "Why would they be too busy?"

"Yeah," Hailstorm nodded suspiciously. "They never forget to remind us that the moor is theirs."

"Like we'd want it anyway," grunted Meadowheart.

"But think about it," Eaglefeather meowed. "Maybe they're planning something, and they want to prepare and are too busy—"

"Oh there's no doubt that Rainstar is planning something, but why would they be too busy to remark their borders?" Meadowheart murmured.

"Well," Eaglefeather persisted, "maybe they want to confuse us as to why they're not marking their borders. Maybe they're trying to put us on edge and confuse us so that we're easier to trick. Every creature is easier to deceive when they're confused."

"But we're not *that* stupid," Hailstorm laughed, though he couldn't stop a feeling of apprehension from clawing at his spine at Eaglefeather's words. *Was* this Rainstar's plan?

"There is sense in Eaglefeather's words," Meadowheart nodded thoughtfully. "We should report this to Eveningstar. Maybe he can send out a patrol tomorrow to investigate."

Hailstorm nodded. "Yes. There's nothing much we can do, right now anyway."

"Will we tell him about the monster?" asked Eaglefeather.

"I think we should," Meadowheart meowed. "Since it's still on our territory."

Hailstorm nodded. "I agree."

Eaglefeather yawned. "Let's get back to camp then."

The three warriors turned away from the moor and headed back into the forest. Hailstorm cast one last glance over his shoulder at the meadow, then turned and followed his Clanmates back to camp, remembering to pick up the soaked moss for Sagetail's kits.

Hailstorm offered to report to Eveningstar and murmured his goodnights to Eaglefeather and Meadowheart as they padded away to the nursery to drop off the moss. He turned and trotted over to

the High-stone, its flat top rising a few tail-lengths above his head. Hailstorm leaned back and rocked his haunches, then leapt, landing neatly on the lichen-covered top. Cautiously, he padded forward and whispered, "Eveningstar?"

There was no answer. Was he asleep? *Maybe I should tell him tomorrow.*

But as Hailstorm turned around, a rustling sound came from inside Eveningstar's den. "Hailstorm? Is that you?"

"Yes," Hailstorm answered his leader. "I have news from the evening patrol."

"Alright, come in," Eveningstar murmured. Hailstorm carefully stepped into the small cave, feeling the smooth stone beneath his paws. He saw Eveningstar sitting up in the corner on top of his large moss nest. He licked his front paw, then meowed, "What's the news?"

Hailstorm sat down and began. "First, as we were patrolling the NightClan border, we came across a... well, an upturned monster. It had veered off the Thunderpath and crashed through the bushes and snapped some trees." Hailstorm felt a snarl bubbling up inside him, and he pushed it away.

"What?" exclaimed Eveningstar, disbelief in his voice. "A monster off the Thunderpath?"

Hailstorm nodded. "Yes. And its Twolegs abandoned it; it's still lying dead in our territory."

"We'll have to be careful then," he muttered, more to himself than Hailstorm. "I never would have thought..." he trailed off. Then he shook his head. "Okay. What else?"

"Well," Hailstorm continued. "DayClan hasn't been marking their border for a while."

"Really?" the DawnClan leader asked suspiciously. "I wonder why we haven't noticed it before."

"Well, we were downwind from the moor today. Maybe last time the patrols weren't."

Eveningstar nodded thoughtfully. "Maybe."

A silence followed this.

"That's all," Hailstorm murmured.

"Thank you, Hailstorm," Eveningstar meowed, his eyes distant, pondering and digesting what Hailstorm had told him.

Hailstorm dipped his head. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Eveningstar nodded, then turned and curled up his nest with his chin on his large white paws. He stared at the stone walls, deep in thought.

Hailstorm backed out of the den and leapt off the High-stone, landing neatly in the grass. He stretched at the base of the boulder, then sleepily walked into the warriors' den, finding Clovertail and Sparrowtail curled up next to each other. Hailstorm smiled, then found his nest beside his sister's. He tucked his paws under his chest and wrapped his tail around his body, quickly falling asleep.

* * *

Heartbeats later, it seemed, Hailstorm was awoken by the sound of pounding paws outside of the camp. Bats shrieked in the distance, and the white light of the moon shone eerily down through the branches of the warriors den.

Cats, Hailstorm realized with a jolt of confusion and worry. *Those are cats' pawsteps.*

The thundering grew louder, and Hailstorm bolted upright as he realized that it was coming straight to the camp.

The warriors around him sat up too as they heard the drumming pawsteps, and they were on their feet in an instant, fur bristled. Twigfoot and Rustypelt raced from the den, everyone else following.

Terror pricked along Hailstorm's spine as he heard the cats burst into the camp, panting hard. Was it an attack? He shoved his way out of the den behind Moonshine, claws unsheathed and ready to defend his Clanmates with his life. A breeze carried the newcomers' fear-scents, and Hailstorm recognized it: NightClan. Two cats were hunched over in the clearing, their eyes wide with fear and their breathing heavy.

Hailstorm's tail lashed, and he flattened his ears. *What in the name of StarClan is happening? Why are two NightClan cats here?*

More and more DawnClan cats emerged from their dens, and Hailstorm saw Aspenleaf and Sagetail trying to keep their kits inside the nursery. Across the camp, Spruceclaw and Copperleaf stood in front of the elders' den, teeth bared. Eveningstar leapt out of his den and faced the NightClan patrol. "What do you want?" he asked, his voice filled with anger.

Hailstorm recognized Duckflight, who panted, "Day... Clan... our camp..."

"What?" exclaimed Twigfoot from behind Eveningstar.

"DayClan... DayClan has attacked our camp!" wailed the other smaller cat, whom Hailstorm recognized as Ripplepaw.

"They're... trying to drive us out," panted Duckflight, his pale green eyes filled with horror. "And they're fighting to kill. They've already killed Greenwood, one of our elders!"

Hailstorm exchanged a bewildered glance with Eaglefeather, heart skipping a beat.

"Please help!" Ripplepaw wailed, shaking in terror.

Duckflight turned to Eveningstar, pleading in his voice. "Will you help us?"

Eveningstar and Twigfoot stared at each other, then Eveningstar nodded. "Rainstar and her plans are a threat to all of us. But I'm not sure we can give you that many warriors; I need some of you to stay here and defend our camp too."

"Robintail and Cliffsand went to get DuskClan's help," Duckflight murmured.

Eveningstar nodded. "Twigfoot, take a patrol. I'll stay here with the rest of the Clan. We need to be able to defend the camp if DayClan decides to attack DawnClan as well."

Twigfoot nodded, then turned to Yellowpaw, who sat wide-eyed at the entrance to the medicine cats den. "Be ready for injuries," he ordered his daughter. "Goldheart's at the Moonfall; he won't be here to help you this time."

Instead of looking fearful, Yellowpaw's eyes filled with determination and she raised her head higher. "You can count on me," she promised.

"Now," Eveningstar meowed loudly for all of DawnClan to hear. "Although three of our cats are gone at the Moonfall, we must stay strong. StarClan decreed that there were always four Clans. We need to keep it that way."

The DawnClan cats in the clearing nodded, sharing glances.

"Alright," Twigfoot called. "Sunfur, Sparktail, Twilightfoot, Hailstorm, Clovertail, and Creekfall. You'll come with me. And Gravelpelt, Sparrowtail, and Prairiefoot," he turned to face them. "You will be the backup, and the reinforcements."

Eveningstar dipped his head to his deputy, then padded to join his cats in the clearing.

Duckflight dipped his head gratefully to Eveningstar. "Thank you so much. NightClan is in your debt."

"There won't be any debt if there isn't any of NightClan left!" Twigfoot exclaimed urgently. "Lead the way, Duckflight!"

Duckflight and Ripplepaw turned tail and sprinted away, pine needles and dirt flying into the air. Twigfoot leapt after them, dusky brown fur on edge. Hailstorm raced after his father, Clovertail right beside him. Twilightfoot, Rustypelt, Sparktail, and Sunfur sprinted along just behind them, and Sparrowtail and Prairiefoot were just in

front of them. Creekfall ran beside Gravelpelt, his tail bristled. Hailstorm pushed forward, fury building up inside him with every breath. Was this why DayClan wasn't marking their borders? Was this Rainstar's plan that Eaglefeather had been thinking of?

Those fox-hearts! How dared Rainstar! Hailstorm hoped she was there, so that he could shred that mangy excuse for a leader! He wanted to feel her fur between his claws, taste her blood on his tongue. He wanted to teach her a lesson once and for all. Rainstar's evil plans affected all the Clans! *That's what warriors are meant to do: protect and defend their Clanmates, and keep the justice that the warrior code demands. There will always be four Clans!* Hailstorm thought with a growl.

Rainstar had better watch out. DayClan didn't know him until they felt his claws sink into their flesh. He'd give them something to remember DawnClan by!

Chapter 17

Whispersong limped beside Echoheart, still weakened from the rogue fight a quarter-moon ago. They had reached the end of the Twolegplace just yesterday.

When they had finished their burial for Hazel after the battle, River had said that he couldn't go on helping them; that he wouldn't be any part of more death, even if it wasn't any of the Clan cats' faults; he didn't blame them, he just couldn't go on. They'd said that they understood, and were grateful for everything they'd ever done for them. Pansy had wished them luck with a miserable look in her eyes, and Whispersong had apologized over and over again for not being able to help Hazel. River had assured her that there was nothing any cat could have done; there weren't any herbs in Twolegplaces anyway. Though his yellow eyes were still filled with grief, he'd treated Whispersong with kindness, forgiving her easily whenever she'd apologized. But Whispersong hadn't been convinced. The guilt of seeing Pansy crying over a dying Hazel, and not having been able to help, still haunted her dreams and ached in her heart.

"Come on," Bumblefrost meowed from up ahead as the two sisters slowed. He looked back at Whispersong, and, seeing the miserable look in her brown eyes, fell back, motioning for Echoheart to take the lead. Echoheart nodded and headed up the steep slope, gripping the jagged rocks and thick-rooted bushes for support.

Bumblefrost turned to Whispersong. "You're still thinking about Hazel, aren't you?"

Whispersong nodded miserably, tears building up in her eyes and clouding her vision.

"You know it wasn't your fault," murmured Bumblefrost quietly.

"It wasn't yours either," Whispersong meowed sternly.

"I know," Bumblefrost sighed. "I just can't help feeling guilty for arguing with Cosmo. He was leading us through the alley to protect us from the rogues, because their territory was around it. Well I guess the alley belonged to the rogues, too."

"But you saved us by arguing," Whispersong pointed out. "If you hadn't, we'd have walked right into the alley, filled with Poison and his rogues, and more of us would've died."

"I guess," he sighed. "But what's done is done. We can't change the past." He llicked her cheek. "Don't look so miserable. River and Pansy are safe now."

"But Hazel isn't," Whispersong shook her head.

Bumblefrost didn't answer. Whispersong looked ahead as Echoheart leapt onto a leaning pine tree, pausing for a breath. Bumblefrost stopped and nodded for Whispersong to go first. Whispersong rocked back onto her haunches then sprang off the ground, clawing her way up the dark brown bark to sit beside her sister. Bumblefrost joined them heartbeats later, and the three sat in silence, looking over the Twolegplace they had passed through.

"There's the grassland where River, Pansy, and... where River and Pansy live," meowed Echoheart quietly. "Good thing it wasn't far from where we split up. They're probably home now."

"I hope they made it back safely," Bumblefrost added.

"Let's get going," Whispersong meowed, not wanting to talk about Pansy and River. The wind buffeted her fur, cold compared to the wind they'd felt in the Twolegplace. She looked up and saw light gray clouds rolling in the distance behind her, and she shivered.

Bumblefrost let out a long sigh. "More snow."

"I've had enough snow to last a lifetime," muttered Echoheart.

"Come on," Whispersong urged them, and the three continued up the slope, soon clustered with more and more pine and spruce trees,

dark green against the gray boulders scattering the mountain.

By dusk, the weather had turned colder and the sky was overcast with gray clouds, racing by quickly with the wind. Shadows fell on the traveling cats as the sun set behind the mountains, and Whispersong shivered as the first snowflakes tumbled through the air.

Whispersong looked up ahead of her where Echoheart and Bumblefrost were walking. Their voices echoed off the stone cliffs, and Whispersong heard the two bickering about shelter.

"If we rest now, we'll be out of the snow storm," Echoheart meowed stubbornly.

"But if we do rest now, we'll sleep with empty bellies," Bumblefrost protested.

"We did it in leaf-bare. We're used to it," Echoheart argued. Bumblefrost opened his mouth to speak, but Echoheart interrupted him. "Oh, yeah. I forgot. DayClan had a great amount of prey during leaf-bare! Stealing it from NightClan, trying to steal it from DawnClan—"

"Cut it out, you two," Whispersong growled. "I thought you'd finally agreed to get along."

Echoheart didn't answer, and Bumblefrost stared ahead, tail twitching.

"And, just so you know," Whispersong put in. "Bumblefrost never liked Rainstar's plan. If his mentor ordered him to go help fetch prey from NightClan, he'd find some way so that he wouldn't go, because he knew that his Clan was taking more prey than NightClan allowed."

Echoheart glanced at Whispersong in surprise, then stared at Bumblefrost. "Really?"

Bumblefrost nodded curtly.

"You're less like DayClan than I thought," Echoheart murmured, the

wind carrying her voice to Whispersong's ears.

Whispersong nodded. "He's not half-bad, is he?" she teased, catching Bumblefrost's eyes as he turned his head to glare at her. "Only teasing," she purred.

Bumblefrost shook his head in amusement and fell back to walk with Whispersong, licking her ear in affection. Then his eyes became serious, and he asked, "What do you think is going on back in the forest?"

Whispersong shook her head. "I hope nothing bad."

"With Rainstar you just never know," Bumblefrost sighed.

"Speaking out against your leader now?" Echoheart taunted.

"She was decent when I was little," Bumblefrost defended himself. "But she was the deputy then. I remember hearing about battles with DuskClan that happened before I was born, when Rainstar was a warrior. Those battles... changed her, from what I've heard. She fought viciously, and she was made deputy, then leader. And when she made Heatpool deputy and took Burningwood as a mate, she became who she is now. That's what I've been told anyway."

"Don't be mouse-brained," Echoheart meowed. "No cat just *changes* ."

"*She* did," Bumblefrost muttered.

"But, how?" Whispersong asked. "Ever since I was a kit, the warriors told stories of her being too ambitious and willing to do whatever it took to get what she wanted."

Bumblefrost shrugged. "Yes, but she changed before you were born. This all happened when our parents were younger, probably apprentices."

Whispersong nodded in thought.

Echoheart added, "She was probably just waiting for some cat to agree with her and support her, but I'd bet you that evil was always inside her."

"Hmm," Bumblefrost muttered, eyes narrowed against the cold. The wind howled in the trees and whistled through the mountains crevices.

"I say we find shelter," Whispersong shouted against the wind. "It's getting worse."

Echoheart turned to Bumblefrost and raised her chin, her eyes saying, *I told you so.*

Bumblefrost rolled his eyes, then motioned for Echoheart to lead the way.

Whispersong turned to him as Echoheart pushed against the wind in front of them. "You sure have changed," Whispersong meowed "In a good way," she added. "The first time you met Echoheart, you acted like you wanted to claw her throat out."

"I... I was different then."

Whispersong nodded. "It was Rainstar's influence, I think; her views have become the whole of DayClan's," she sighed.

"Oh, what will Rainstar do next?" Bumblefrost meowed, staring at his paws. "I wonder if we'll ever get rid of her."

Whispersong glanced at the DayClan warrior in surprise. "You want to get rid of her?" she echoed in disbelief.

Bumblefrost twitched his ears in embarrassment. "I don't know. She's not bringing any good to the forest; she had good intentions, I believe, but she's gone about it all wrong. And she's changed my Clanmates, especially my sister. Songtail used to so fun and eager to be a good warrior, but she's become too involved in Rainstar's plans. Don't get me wrong," he added when Whispersong looked at him sympathetically. "She still cares about me, and defends her Clan with her life, like any other warrior does, but," he sighed, "it's for the wrong cause."

"Everything will work out in the end," Whispersong meowed.

"But I'm not sure it will!" Bumblefrost cried out, his thick black tail

lashing. "What will happen when we get home? What will Rainstar think? What will your Clan think, especially when they find out about... me?"

Whispersong bowed her head. "I don't know," she sighed.

Echoheart, who had raced ahead, came running back down the slope to them. "I found the perfect shelter!" she exclaimed. "It's under an overhang in the stone. Come on!"

Whispersong followed her sister up the boulders, leaping swiftly over the gaps between them. Echoheart turned left, into a thicker patch of trees, sparse patches of grass jutting out from the rocks. A large stone wall rose above their head, and Whispersong was reminded of the hollow in the DawnClan camp, only this one was much taller.

"There," Echoheart meowed proudly, pointing with her nose at a hollowed-out crevice under two large boulders leaning against each other.

Whispersong suddenly was taken back to the Pointed Mountain. A younger Bumblefrost was leading her through a patch of sage bushes, down the orange and gray jagged slope. He showed her to a cave in the wall, declaring that it'd be their secret meeting place during Gatherings; they'd be CaveClan.

Whispersong smiled and cast a glance at Bumblefrost, who was staring at her warmly, thinking the same thing she was. Echoheart was already slipping inside the crevice, and Whispersong butted her flank against Bumblefrost's playfully. "Come on, my faithful deputy."

Bumblefrost smiled. "Anything for you, Whisperstar."

Whispersong purred in amusement and padded ahead, following her sister into the sheltered cave.

Bumblefrost came in a few moments later, carrying a long, frozen green stem of leaves in his jaws. His eyes glittered with playfulness and he dropped it at Whispersong's feet. She stared down at it and

recognized it immediately: a jasmine leaf. She smiled. "Like the first time," she purred.

Bumblefrost nodded.

Whispersong blinked. "How did you find one? The ground is frozen up here."

Bumblefrost shrugged. "It was growing right in front of the cave; the only one."

Echoheart stepped between them. "What's so important about a jasmine leaf?" she asked, blue eyes full of confusion.

"We played a game with a jasmine leaf the first time we... well, the first time we met and snuck away during the Gathering."

Echoheart stared at her, eyes filled with taunting.

"Just to play," Whispersong added with embarrassment, feeling her fur grow hot.

"Well, maybe it's a sign," Bumblefrost murmured.

"A *sign* ?" Echoheart scoffed, snorting. "A sign of what? That you two lovebirds were meant for each other?"

"No," Bumblefrost growled through clenched teeth, flattening his ears.

"I was only teasing." Echoheart rolled her eyes. "Seriously, though. What would it be a sign of?"

"That we're on the right track," Bumblefrost muttered. "It was the only one growing, and the only plant that's actually *alive*."

Whispersong nodded. "Bumblefrost and I did recognize it, and it was near this cave, which is giving us shelter."

"You two have gone mouse-brained," Echoheart laughed, shaking her head.

"You're mouse-brained yourself," muttered Bumblefrost, and Whispersong cast him a stern look. Fortunately, Echoheart didn't seem to hear him. "How else are we supposed to find whatever you two were sent here to find?" Bumblefrost challenged.

"There were clues," Echoheart argued.

"Yes, *about* the cats, but not *where* they are," exclaimed Bumblefrost, tail twitching.

"I know that," retorted Echoheart.

A silence hung in the air, and the three of them stared at their paws.

"Well," Whispersong spoke up. "He does have a point. How will we know that we're on the right track? We could be heading in the total opposite direction for all we know. The mountains are vast, more than we can imagine. Maybe you're right, Bumblefrost. Maybe it's a sign from StarClan."

Bumblefrost snorted and looked at Echoheart. "See? It's not such a stupid idea, is it?"

Whispersong nodded, looking at Echoheart too. "Yes, it could mean we're heading in the right direction; it'd be an easily-recognizable sign for me and Bumblefrost."

"We can figure it out in the morning," Echoheart yawned.

Bumblefrost nodded, staring outside. The last trace of the evening had faded away, leaving a pitch black sky in its place. There wasn't any light; no moon; no stars; not even the lights of Twolegplace that she'd become used to seeing in the past quarter-moon. The wind howled and the trees blew around viciously, creaking in the storm. A breeze swept into the cave, carrying flurries of snow inside. Whispersong shivered.

Echoheart yawned to Whispersong's left, and there was a quiet sliding noise as her sister's fur rubbed against the cave floor and she curled up on the cold stone. Whispersong nosed her way blindly over to her and laid down beside her, tucking her cold muzzle

under her tail. She felt Bumblefrost slide down on her left, laying his warm chin down on her flank. Whispersong purred and let the howling of the wind and her own purring lull her to sleep.

* * *

Whispersong jerked her head up. It was still dark out, and a thick layer of snow was piled up outside the small cave. Whispersong shook her head. She'd just woken up from a dream, a dream full of pain in her sides, but now she couldn't remember what it was.

She sighed inwardly. The only thing she'd got out of the dream was that she now remembered what herbs were used to treat deep wounds: tansy, goldenrod, and dock. Why did she remember this now? *She* wasn't in danger, and neither were Bumblefrost and Echoheart; and she only remembered which herbs were which when some cat she knew well was injured. It was a strange gift; she guessed was given to her by StarClan for the journey to the mountains. Echoheart's gift must be being able to sense feelings and somewhat sense thoughts. Whispersong thought about this; it made sense: Echoheart had known that Whispersong had been sneaking out those times to meet Bumblefrost because she had been able to sense Whispersong's excitement and guilt. And she had known Cosmo's feelings of dread, regret, and guilt, as she had mentioned the other day. All Whispersong had picked up was the kittypet's fear scent, not any of his other emotions.

Whispersong sighed. Both of their newly-given gifts had helped them, but Whispersong thought hers had also failed them.

Her thoughts drifted back to her dream as the image of dock leaves and images of wounds filled her mind again. Someone close to her, some cat she knew well, was injured; that was the only way she'd remember these herbs. Worry swept over her; but she, Echoheart, and Bumblefrost were fine. She thought about it, confused. What other cats could her dream be referring to?

Then it hit her. She sat up and let out a gasp of shock.

DawnClan is in danger.

Whispersong began to panic. Her Clanmates were injured badly, so badly that Whispersong, in the *mountains*, a whole moon's travels away, was having a dream about it.

Something bad was happening back home; Whispersong was sure of it. Something really bad.

Chapter 18

Hailstorm sprinted across the Thunderpath, Clovertail and Sunfur right in front of him. The hard gravel tore at his pads, but he pushed himself forward. DayClan was killing other cats; he wouldn't give up so easily!

Duckflight and Ripplepaw wove through the forest, Twigfoot hard on their paws. Twilightfoot fell behind, panting as old age caught up with him; but the black and white tom's eyes were narrowed in determination as he raced alongside Sparktail and Gravelpelt. Creekfall leapt over a boulder behind them, his pace not slowing as his gray eyes smoldered with hatred. He panted and his flanks heaved, but he kept going, bolting ahead to catch up with Twigfoot.

Sparrowtail and Prairiefoot passed Hailstorm, and Hailstorm realized that his own pace was slowing. His muscles ached and his chest heaved. He took a few shallow breaths, ragged with exhaustion, then gave an extra push, catching up with his Clanmates in front of him.

Soon the thick pine and spruce trees blotted out the moon, and the darkness washed over the cats as they darted, half-blinded by darkness and by the unfamiliar territory, through the NightClan forest. Ripplepaw and Duckflight seemed to know the way, however; despite the darkness, they led the DawnClan patrol swiftly through their territory.

Soon high-pitched yowls echoed ominously through the air, and shrieks full of rage and agony chilled Hailstorm to the bone. Heartbeats later, he burst into a clearing lined with brambles and tall pines. NightClan and DayClan cats blurred in the clearing, tumbling blurs of fur and claws. There were so many, each as furious as the next, and Hailstorm couldn't tell which cats were from NightClan and which were from DayClan.

Ripplepaw let out a yowl of defiance and raced to his mother, Brownear. A small, long-haired ginger she-cat fought beside them,

and Hailstorm heard Ripplepaw gasp, "Flowerpaw!"

Duckflight raced to Goosefur's aid as a large, broad-shouldered DayClan warrior bowled him over. Hailstorm was about to leapt forward and help, but he was shoved to the ground. He felt the pine needles stab into his sides as he slid across the NightClan camp, hitting a log. He looked up, bewildered. A light brown tom with a scarred white muzzle stood over him.

"What are you doing here?" Cougarfang snarled. "This isn't your fight!"

Hailstorm kicked up with his hind legs, raking his claws across Cougarfang's white belly. The DayClan warrior gave a snarl of surprise, then leapt aside. Hailstorm quickly scrambled to his paws and faced the DayClan warrior again, back arched and ears fattened.

He let out a hiss of rage. "This is NightClan territory. Get out."

"Why don't you come here and make me?" Cougarfang taunted, yellow eyes burning with a challenge.

Hailstorm couldn't back down, for the sake of the suffering NightClan cats. He reared and let out a high-pitched caterwaul, then launched his body at the DayClan cat's. He landed on top of him, rolling in the dirt. Hailstorm felt himself crash into another cat, but he didn't look up to find out who it was. He buried his claws into Cougarfang's shoulders, and the DayClan warrior retaliated. Hailstorm felt teeth sink into his side and he screamed in agony. The pain burned like fire, and he felt throbbing as blood gushed from the wound.

Suddenly the weight was lifted. Hailstorm jerked his head up and saw Clovertail spitting with rage at Cougarfang, swatting at him with outstretched claws. Hailstorm admired his sister's courage and watched as Cougarfang sprinted away. But to Hailstorm's disappointment, the DayClan warrior wasn't fleeing, he just joined another fight.

Hailstorm turned just as Burningwood and Weedfoot raced toward

him. He dodged heartbeats before they reached him, and he turned, wide-eyed, at the two DayClan warriors. He lashed out at Weedfoot, claws extended, feeling the smaller tom's muzzle beneath his paws as he knocked him aside. Then he turned to Burningwood, eyes narrowed. The red-brown tom jumped forward, landing on Hailstorm's shoulders. Hailstorm collapsed and felt claws tear through his fur, and scorching pain turned to a scream of agony. But Burningwood didn't stop there. Hailstorm saw a flash of the DayClan warrior's green eyes before his thorn-sharp teeth met his throat. Hailstorm jerked away, but Burningwood's grip was strong.

He's going to kill me!

But Hailstorm refused to die like this. He twisted until he could kick the DayClan warrior's muzzle with his back claws. Hailstorm pushed hard, feeling his claws make their mark. Burningwood loosened his grip for less than a heartbeat, but Hailstorm had been ready. He jerked himself free, feeling bits of his fur tearing. But he was on his paws again. Burningwood turned back to him, rocking his haunches to launch himself at Hailstorm again.

He's fighting harder than I thought! Hailstorm realized with exhaustion. *He's probably thinking of his dead kit!*

Before Hailstorm could get into another fight, and possibly be killed by Burningwood's ruthless claws, he turned and fled into the bushes, finding Sparktail racing after him. The tang of her blood hit his nose and he saw that her shoulder was torn, and she was limping. Hailstorm raced to her side and helped her out of the NightClan camp.

"Go," she rasped. "Fight."

"Can you get back to the DawnClan camp?" he panted.

The older red she-cat nodded weakly. "I'll be fine. Don't worry about me. I'll send more warriors."

Hailstorm nodded and turned tail, leaving Sparktail as he pushed himself back toward the NightClan camp. Worry crept along his spine as he thought of her injuries. He shook it away.

As Hailstorm burst through the bushes again, he saw many of his Clanmates, weakly fighting off the oncoming DayClan cats. *There are more than we thought!* Hailstorm realized with horror. *We're losing!* But he felt a surge of determination again as he saw the body of a dead, older-looking NightClan cat, lying limp with blood scarring its body. *That must be Greenwood, the elder Duckflight said DayClan had killed!*

Hailstorm bunched his muscles, ready to spring into battle again, but stopped himself as two more DayClan cats burst through the trees just a few fox-lengths away from where he was crouching. Hailstorm felt his fur bristle as he saw Songtail and Foxfang. Then just behind them was a third cat, her ghostly white fur with small black splotches easily recognizable even within the blur of all the other pelts in the clearing. Hailstorm felt anger burn in his stomach.

Rainstar!

Hailstorm let out a loud battle cry and raced toward her. He launched himself at the DayClan leader, taking her by surprise. He shredded her flanks, her white fur quickly reddening with blood. She yelped in pain and lashed out at Hailstorm, her claws catching right underneath his eye. Hailstorm winced as his blood splattered into the air. She pushed him over, her icy-blue eyes glittering with anger.

"What are *you* doing here?" she snarled, obviously surprised that DawnClan was fighting alongside NightClan.

"We came to help fight off *you*, you filthy, mangy, fox-hearted excuse for a cat!" he spat, pushing himself out from underneath her grip. He reared, then he slammed down on her head with his claws. Rainstar crashed to the ground, and Hailstorm raked his claws across her belly. The DayClan leader howled, more in anger than pain, and lunged forward, sinking her teeth into Hailstorm's neck. Hailstorm twisted and rolled, bit and clawed.

I have *to beat her!*

Rainstar got to her paws again, and hissed. "Why do you want to fight me so much?" she sneered. "You must know that I won't die.

You'll die before I will."

"I know," Hailstorm panted, a growl in his voice. "But I can kill you over and over again until you surrender."

Rainstar's eyes filled with disbelief. Then she lashed her tail. "This isn't your fight," she snarled. "You don't know why we came to fight NightClan, we—"

"Why?" Hailstorm laughed mockingly, his body shaking with hatred. "Because you want to, that's why. Because you can."

"No!" she snarled. "Because they *murdered* my kit!"

"And you murdered one of Brownear's kits, Tumblekit," Hailstorm snarled, remembering Ripplepaw's and Flowerpaw's brother who'd died from starvation after DayClan had begun stealing NightClan's prey.

"Me?" Rainstar was now clearly shocked. She looked around the clearing, waiting for any cat to support her. But every cat was fighting and the air was filled so loud with screeching that no other cat but Hailstorm could hear Rainstar.

"Yes, you! Indirectly, but yes!" Hailstorm spat. "You persuaded Beechstar to give you his prey; you—"

"He didn't have to," Rainstar laughed, her blue eyes cold with satisfaction.

Hailstorm snarled, ignoring the DayClan leader, "You stole what they hadn't allowed you to take!"

"Any mouse-brained kit would have seen that," Rainstar growled. "They're oblivious."

"Either way, you caused them to starve. You made them suffer, and many cats died, including a helpless, innocent kit," Hailstorm spat.

Rainstar snorted. "That's what the other Clans did to DayClan, to *me* ! The other Clans made DayClan suffer, they murdered my br—"

But Hailstorm sprang and cut her off, snarling in rage. He began biting and tearing at her throat, and he felt her bloodied fur stuck in between his claws. Rainstar's eyes widened in shock as he gripped tighter, and was that... fear?

Hailstorm sank his teeth deeper. Finally Rainstar went limp, her eyes glazed. But Hailstorm knew she wasn't dead. Shock washed over Hailstorm's body. He'd just taken one of Rainstar's lives.

"Rainstar!"

It was Burningwood. The DayClan warrior raced toward his leader, shoving Hailstorm aside. Before Hailstorm could turn and flee, another cat pulled him down.

Hailstorm looked up to find Heatpool, the DayClan deputy, glaring at him. "You killed her!"

"You've killed NightClan cats!" Hailstorm spat.

"And the other Clans killed DayClan cats! Since before you were even born DayClan has been suffering because of the other Clans!" Heatpool snarled. "You, of course, wouldn't know because your Clan would always make everything seem like DayClan's fault—"

"This *is* DayClan's fault!" Hailstorm snarled. He pushed himself up, only to find himself back on the ground again. He twisted and fought, but Heatpool was stronger. The DayClan deputy leaned back, teeth bared, ready to give the killing blow. Hailstorm closed his eyes, exhaustion washing over him like a wave, but the pain never came. His eyes flew open.

Twigfoot rolled with Heatpool, deputy against deputy. Hailstorm let out a ragged breath of relief as he watched his father claw at Heatpool. He got to his paws to help Twigfoot, then he caught a glimpse of Robintail racing across the camp with Cliffsand, a large patrol of DuskClan cats behind him. The DuskClan cats had come! They yowled out battle cries, and the DayClan warriors widened their eyes in shock as the cats leapt into the battle.

Burningwood hissed as they came rushing forward, a few of them

tackling him to the ground. Rainstar had started to stir, her fatal wound healed, and she raced after her warriors, slamming into DuskClan cats and knocking them aside easily. Rainstar was a better fighter than Hailstorm had thought.

Some cat yelped behind him. Hailstorm whipped his head around and saw Brownear trying to fight off two large DayClan warriors, one of them Cougarfang. They were trying to get into the nursery! Brownear was knocked aside, and lay limp beside the entrance to the nursery, where tiny mewls of terror filled the air. Hailstorm sprinted forward and pushed over Cougarfang.

"Back again?" Cougarfang hissed in annoyance. He clawed at Hailstorm's flanks and held him firmly to the ground, and Hailstorm watched helplessly as the other black-furred DayClan warrior slipped into the nursery.

Suddenly a yowl of shock and horror filled the air as Creekfall raced forward, fur on edge. He spat and hissed, clawing vigorously at the black DayClan tom entering the nursery. The two cats rolled, and Creekfall chased him away. "Fox-hearted dung-face!" he roared, panting as he chased the warrior across the clearing.

Hailstorm struggled underneath Cougarfang's weight, growling in fury as the light brown tom's claws dug into his shoulders. Then suddenly Cougarfang loosened his grip on Hailstorm and let out a gasp of shock, and Hailstorm heard the struggle in his voice as he called after the fleeing black tom. "Coalpelt!" he yowled. Then his voice was quickly cut off as a long-haired, white-furred DuskClan warrior held him in his jaws. It was Blizzardclaw.

Cougarfang fell to the ground, dead, and Hailstorm stared in shock at his body. He turned to Blizzardclaw and nodded gratefully to him, breathless with exhaustion. The DuskClan warrior nodded and huffed, "DayClan stands as a threat to us all right now." The he turned and raced to his Clanmates' sides.

Hailstorm turned and dashed into the nursery. Claws rake his muzzle as he stepped inside, and he let out a shocked hiss. "I'm helping you! I'm a DawnCLan warrior!" he meowed desperately.

The claws let go of him, and a voice breathed, "Was it you who drove away the DayClan cats trying to get me?"

Hailstorm looked up at a NightClan queen and panted, "Well, yes; me and another two warriors." Hailstorm panted, staring at the she-cat's brown tabby body curled protectively around three young kits.

"Larksong!" The voice had come from outside the den. A small black she-cat raced inside. Then she froze when she saw Hailstorm and flattened her ears.

"He's a DawnClan warrior. He helped fight off the DayClan warriors who'd tried to attack me," Larksong told her quickly. "He just came in to see if I was alright." Hailstorm nodded, then he froze as he heard the howls of the battle outside escalate even louder.

"Ravenheart and I can take it from here," Larksong meowed urgently, nodding at the black-furred she-cat. "They need you out there. We can defend the nursery."

Hailstorm nodded and raced out into the darkness, the moonlight glowing eerily on the writhing pelts in the clearing. Sparrowtail and Clovertail were fighting off two DayClan cats, while Hailstorm recognized Snowpaw and Raccoonpaw battling Weedfoot. Pantherclaw fought beside Pebbletail, Cliffsand just to their right. Ripplepaw and Flowerpaw fought near their weakened mother, hissing and spitting at the oncoming warriors. Mapleleaf and Beechstar circled Foxfang, Burningwood, and another large DayClan warrior. Ripplepaw's mentor, Swantail, was locked in a battle with a dark brown she-cat, and Twigfoot was clawing at Rainstar and Heatpool.

We're losing still! Hailstorm realized with horror as he scanned the battlefield. His body filled with hopelessness.

Then Hailstorm heard a shriek of anger and defiance behind him, and he turned to see Moonshine, Meadowheart, and Eaglefeather racing into the battle. Sparktail had made it home safely, and she had sent reinforcements! Hailstorm raced to their side and jumped into battle again, hope energizing him once more. Petalheart, Mushroomcloud, and Robintail joined them, hissing and spitting.

Hailstorm bowled over a large gray tabby tom from DayClan, and easily sent him away. But he didn't flee; he joined another fight against Mapleleaf. *These DayClan cats are relentless!* Hailstorm realized with exhaustion. But he continued onward, briefly catching a glimpse of Rainstar and Beechstar rolling in the dirt, while Rustypelt fought beside Moonshine and Robintail to drive out Applefang and Weedfoot.

Hailstorm jerked his head as a cat slammed into him. Heatpool was getting to his paws; he didn't even notice that he'd hit Hailstorm. The DayClan deputy was turned away from Hailstorm and was hissing at Twigfoot.

Twigfoot faced the DayClan deputy, hackles lifted. "Stay away from my daughter!" he snarled, dusky brown tail lashing.

Hailstorm jerked his head around at these words and saw Clovertail, lying still in the grass beside a large pine tree. An emptiness washed over Hailstorm as he watched her unmoving body.

Then she let out a ragged breath, and Hailstorm sprinted toward her. "Are you alright?" he asked urgently.

His sister looked up at him, her pale green eyes full of pain and her black fur matted with blood. "Twigfoot," was all she rasped, before laying her head down again and shutting her eyes in agony.

Hailstorm lifted his head and watched Twigfoot and Heatpool, locked in vicious combat. Both deputies hissed and spat, blood and fur flying. Hailstorm bunched his muscles, ready to fight beside his father, but stopped. Clovertail was shaking and coughing. He couldn't leave her!

"Here, I'll help you bring her to Bushtail's den." Hailstorm turned and saw Cliffsand dashing forward, her light blue eyes full of worry.

"Where is it?" Hailstorm asked urgently.

"There," she panted, pointing to a large tangle of brambles across the camp.

Across the camp? Hailstorm thought hopelessly. "How are we going to get across without any cat attacking us?" he yowled over the screeching of cats battling around him, Twigfoot's and Heatpool's the loudest.

"Snowpaw!" Cliffsand called. The silver and black tabby she-cat glanced over her shoulder, then she raced over to Hailstorm and Cliffsand, bright amber eyes clouded with worry as she stared down at Clovertail.

"Help us carry her to Bushtail's den," Hailstorm pleaded, aware of his sister's pooled blood staining the forest floor around her.

Snowpaw nodded. "Cliffsand and I will carry her. You protect us if we're attacked."

Hailstorm nodded in determination, then watched as the two she-cats gripped Clovertail's black fur firmly in their jaws. They slowly walked forward, trying their best to avoid any fighting.

Hailstorm clawed at a mottled gray DayClan warrior, snarling curses at him. "Fox-heart! Stay away!" The DayClan tom turned immediately, then raced away to Foxfang and another warrior. Hailstorm eyed every warrior suspiciously, hissing at every cat that passed.

Just before they reached Bushtail's den, claws pulled Hailstorm down.

"Hailstorm!" Snowpaw called, eyes wide.

"Get Clovertail safe!" he yowled desperately, watching the two she-cats carry his sister into the bramble bush.

Hailstorm turned just as a voice hissed tauntingly in his ear. "Aw, what a hero." Hailstorm turned and saw a battle-scarred dark brown she-cat glaring at him with her dark yellow eyes narrowed to slits. Hailstorm lunged into the she-cat's throat, tasting her warm blood in his mouth. He sank deeper and deeper, feeling her struggle desperately beneath him. Then she fell limp, and Hailstorm let go, spitting out her blood.

He turned, but to his terror, she leapt at him again. It'd been a trick! He spat with rage, feeling blood gush from his side as she deepened a wound Cougarfang had given him. He screeched, and adrenaline made him stronger. He shoved with all his might, launching her off of him. She hit the ground, dazed, then, with one last glance at Hailstorm, she sprinted across the clearing, Weedfoot behind her.

"This way, Hawktuft!" Weedfoot called after the dark brown she-cat.

Hailstorm looked around the clearing. Were all the DayClan cats gone?

A screech made him jerk his head around. Heatpool stood over Twigfoot, while behind him, Rainstar and Burningwood bit and clawed at Beechstar, Blizzardclaw, and Pantherclaw.

Then suddenly a loud gurgling sound filled the air. Hailstorm watched in horror as Heatpool sunk his teeth into Twigfoot's throat, cutting off the dusky brown warrior's scream of pain. Hailstorm swayed on his paws. Hordes of cats lunged at Heatpool, and Hailstorm watched as Moonshine ripped Heatpool's fur apart. Gravelpelt and Meadowheart bolted forward, while more NightClan and DuskClan cats launched toward Rainstar and Burningwood.

"Run!" Burningwood urged his mate. "We've lost! All of our warriors are gone!"

"Not yet we haven't!" the DayClan leader snarled, preparing to fight the oncoming cats.

Burningwood shoved her aside. "What would happen if we died? What about our kits?"

Rainstar stopped. "Fine. Let's go." She dodged the warriors easily and raced forward.

"What about Heatpool?" panted Burningwood, bolting after Rainstar.

"He's dead," she growled. Rainstar feld the NightClan camp, her eyes burning like blue fire. Hailstorm knew that look; it said, *this isn't over. We'll be back.*

Burningwood leapt after her, but Rustypelt and Robintail were too fast. They pinned Burningwood down, clawing at his brown-red fur. Blizzardclaw, Mushroomcloud, Duckflight, Twilightfoot, Mapleleaf, Beechstar, Cliffsand, Sparrowtail,... they all joined in the fight, killing Burningwood within heartbeats. Rainstar let out a yowl of horror, echoing ominously across the clearing. Her eyes were smoldering blue embers as she glared at every cat in the NightClan camp. She let out another howl, filled with both agony and fury, then turned tail and sprinted after her fleeing Clanmates. A NightClan warrior snarled, "And stay away!" as her white, blood-splotched fur disappeared in the trees beyond.

Hailstorm panted and surveyed the wreckage. Flowerpaw and Ripplepaw crouched beside Brownear's limp body, tears spilling over. The black she-cat whom Hailstorm had seen helping Larksong guard the nursery earlier was lying still on the ground as well, two black and white kits nestling against her. Hailstorm felt a cold stone drop into his hollow belly as he saw Larksong and her kit lie down next to the limp black she-cat and her two kits.

Hailstorm watched as a few NightClan cats moved Heatpool's ragged body, heading away from the camp. Right behind them, a few DuskClan cats dragged Burningwood across the dirt and out of the camp.

Hailstorm turned, and his stomach sank horribly. Moonshine was standing over a dusky brown body, matted with blood and dust. "No," she moaned, her white pelt trembling.

Hailstorm shook his head, feeling empty inside. This wasn't real, it couldn't be.

He suddenly felt lightheaded. He swayed back and forth, paws trembling, then fell to the ground, blackness flashing before him. He was faintly aware of Sparrowtail and Prairiefoot racing over to him, yowling that he'd lost a lot of blood. But by then Hailstorm was already unconscious, engulfed in a darkness that he never wanted to wake from again.

Chapter 19

"What?" Echoheart bolted upright from sleep. Whispersong had just let out a gasp of fear, and Echoheart's stomach churned with worry as she stared at her sister. "What's wrong?" she demanded.

Whispersong was trembling. "DawnClan is in danger!" she breathed.

"How do you know?" asked Echoheart, feeling Bumblefrost stir beside her.

"I had a dream," Whispersong whimpered. "There was pain, and blood. I woke up remembering that dock, tansy, and goldenrod were used to treat deep wounds."

Echoheart narrowed her eyes. She knew her sister only remembered which herbs were which if some cat she knew well was in danger. "But it could be anything; it might even be us. We're still not healed all the way from the battle with those rogues," she scowled, remembering the evil glint in the rogue cats' eyes.

"No," Whispersong insisted. "I checked you two; you're fine."

"Of course we're fine," Bumblefrost yawned, just waking up. He laid his tail on Whispersong's side. "Why wouldn't we be?"

Whispersong told him about her dream. "I realized that the only other cats I was *close* to were DawnClan cats. They're injured. Something bad is happening!" she howled.

"Well, we can't help them," Bumblefrost stated. "We're nearly a *moon's* travels away!"

Whispersong glared at him. "Cats might die!"

Bumblefrost licked her cheek. "It'll be fine. You'll see."

Whispersong didn't answer. She rubbed her face into Bumblefrost's fur, moaning quietly.

"Well," Echoheart meowed quietly. "Think about how worried they are about us. We could be dead for all they know. And they can't do anything if we're in danger, right?" Echoheart asked her sister.

"No," Whispersong murmured quietly.

"Well we can't help them any more than they can to help us," Echoheart pointed out.

"But what if it's the *danger* ?" Whispersong breathed, her fear-scent filling the cave.

Echoheart froze in fear. She hadn't thought of that!

"The 'danger'?" Bumblefrost echoed in confusion.

"We had a dream from StarClan; a danger is coming," Whispersong murmured. "We should have told you earlier. I'm sorry, we should have—"

"Then why did you leave if this danger is so bad?" asked Bumblefrost, sounding completely bewildered.

"We had a dream from StarClan telling us that we had to leave for the mountains; that the mountains could help with the danger," Echoheart told the confused DayClan warrior, trying to sound calm, but fear was racing through her body. What if the danger *had* come? It'd be too soon! What if they got back to find the Clans *gone* ? To find their Clanmates *dead* ?

"It can't be the danger, whatever it is," Bumblefrost murmured. "StarClan wouldn't have sent you away."

"I guess not," Echoheart murmured.

"So why did *you* two get this dream?" asked Bumblefrost.

"Well, we got the first dream when we were six moons old, almost apprentices. There... there was a prophecy in it," Whispersong began, and for once Echoheart didn't stop her. Echoheart trusted Bumblefrost now; and he needed to know why they had left.

"When you were *kits* ?" Bumblefrost exclaimed. "You were given a prophecy *that* long ago?"

"Yes," Whispersong nodded. "A StarClan cat came to visit us and told us this: 'Darkness will veil the sky, but with the whispering voice of two, the forest, as one, will echo with light'."

"What in the name of StarClan does *that* mean?" Bumblefrost asked.

Echoheart sighed. "It means that a darkness is coming to the forest, but with two cats, all the Clans will become united, as one, and bring light against the darkness. So, basically: two cats will save the Clans from a coming danger."

"Okay, so why did *you* two—" Bumblefrost started, then cut off as he said the word 'two'.

"Yes," Echoheart nodded, sensing the DayClan warrior's thoughts. "We are the cats in the prophecy."

"What?" Bumblefrost exclaimed. "You two? Part of a prophecy?"

"Yes," Whispersong nodded. "That's why we had to come to the mountains. We need to find out more about the danger."

"What danger?" Bumblefrost asked, becoming more confused by the heartbeat.

"Whispersong and I had a vision, in the same dream as the prophecy," Echoheart told him. "There was a creature; bigger than any I've ever see, and more evil too."

"A badger?" asked Bumblefrost.

"No, bigger."

"What? But—"

"We don't know what it is either," Echoheart sighed. "The StarClan warriors that told us to go to the mountains said that there were cats here that could help us figure out more about the creature and the danger it will cause."

"But first we have to find the cats," Whispersong sighed.

Bumblefrost looked between the two sisters, and Echoheart could sense his confusion. "Okay, let me get this straight. You two have to save *all* four Clans?"

Whispersong nodded.

"By yourselves?"

"We don't know yet," Echoheart murmured.

"How in the name of StarClan are you going to *unite* the Clans into one big group? It's impossible! Rainstar and most of DayClan would rather die, and I'm sure lots of the cats in the other Clans would too."

"I know," Echoheart sighed. "We'll just have to wait to see what happens. We have no idea either."

"I'll help you," Bumblefrost meowed immediately. "I can help persuade DayClan—"

"And will they listen to you?" asked Echoheart. "You ran off with two DawnClan cats without telling your Clan, you never fully supported Rainstar's plans—"

"Okay, we get it," growled Bumblefrost. Then he sighed sadly. "You're right. They won't want me. I don't even think Songtail will defend me."

"It'll work out," Echoheart meowed.

Bumblefrost sighed again. "I hope so."

* * *

The next day, the snow storm had blown away, leaving a frozen white layer over the entire landscape. The thin snow clouds blew over their heads, carried by the freezing wind. The trees started to thin out, and the grass became scarcer, and soon, nearly all the vegetation was gone and just bare rock, ice, and snow were all that Echoheart could see.

Echoheart's stomach growled again; it had been growling all morning. *How are we supposed to hunt in this barren landscape?*

Suddenly movement caught her eye. A falcon! She knew they were dangerous, but they were hungry, and they needed every bit of prey they could find. Echoheart bolted after it, thankful that her gray fur blended in with the stone jutting out of the snow. She leapt up off a boulder, clawing at the large brown bird desperately. She slid back down, scraping her pads on the sharp edges. But she'd caught the falcon. *Thank you, StarClan!* she thought gratefully. Her mouth watered as the scent hit her nose.

"Well done!" Echoheart turned and saw Whispersong swishing his tail in excitement.

"Thank StarClan! I'm starving!" Bumblefrost meowed.

Echoheart trotted through the snow over to them and began plucking off the falcon's feathers, spitting them into the wind and watching them blow out of sight.

"Do you want some or not?" Whispersong asked, her mouth full.

Echoheart turned to the falcon; it was already half-eaten. "Hey! I caught it!"

"Then hurry up and eat some already," Bumblefrost meowed through a mouthful.

Echoheart bent down and tore off a piece of her prey, closing her eyes in joy as the flavors filled her mouth. She swallowed eagerly

and took another bite. They ate it until all that remained were its bones. They licked each clean of meat, wanting every last morsel for their hard journey through the desolate, stone landscape of the mountains.

Echoheart bent down to lick her own paws, running them along her head. She washed her ears, muzzle, paws, and chest before asking, "Ready?"

Whispersong and Bumblefrost nodded and together the three trudged through the snow.

Echoheart let out a gasp of pain as she stepped on a sharp point beneath the snow.

Whispersong cried out, "Ouch!" and Bumblefrost hissed as they both stepped on hidden stones too.

"Too many fox-dunged rocks!" growled Bumblefrost.

"Let's try walking up there." Whispersong pointed at a jagged peak rising above the snow. "There isn't any snow on it."

"But if *snow* can't stick to it, we definitely won't," Bumblefrost muttered.

"Yeah, I guess so," Whispersong sighed. "But down here we'll be stabbed to death."

Echoheart looked around. Peaks rose on all sides of them, clouds hovering at their tops. A slope steadily rose just to her right, and the wind blew all the snow off of it to reveal smooth, gray stone. "Look!" she called. "There isn't any snow over there, and it's flat enough to walk on."

Bumblefrost nodded and Whispersong's brown eyes lit up. "Good find!"

Echoheart turned to head over the flat, snowless stone. She could now see where all the sharp stones were, and easily avoided them. Their path took them around the steep peaks and easily through the mountains. Echoheart padded along, wondering how it was so easy.

Almost too easy.

By sunhigh though, she found that she was right; her path had been too easy. They'd traveled too far to turn around, and now they faced new dangers. On their right, the stone fell away to a deep valley, and Echoheart had to dig her claws deep into the stone to steady herself. She shook away her dizziness and stared down the cliff, a sheer drop to certain death.

Ahead, dark gray clouds billowed in the distance, promising a large storm. *These mountains are insane! And the weather is no better*, Echoheart thought, shuddering.

"Stay away from there," Bumblefrost warned.

"I... I am." Echoheart swallowed nervously and pressed closer to the stone wall to her left and tried to cross safely to the other side. Ice layered the path in the cliff's shadows, threatening to unbalance Ecoheart at any moment. She carefully tested each pawstep before putting her weight on it, praying that she wouldn't slip.

"What are you doing?" gasped Whispersong.

"We have to get by, don't we?" she meowed shakily, not taking her eyes off the path in front of her. She placed one paw in front of the other, claws digging deep into the ice.

"Careful!" Whispersong called, and Echoheart detected her sister's fear.

Echoheart padded ahead, and suddenly a cliff laid in front of her, a stream of water from the cliff above falling over the edge of it. At the very bottom was a deep, gray canyon, carved by the small waterfall. Mist rose up and soaked Echoheart's fur, and she shivered. She stared across the gap; it was about a fox-length and a half long. They'd have to jump.

It's shorter than the stream, Echoheart thought, trying to be positive. But there was ice. Her legs trembled. There was no turning back.

"What?" Whispersong hollered, seeing that Echoheart had stopped. Echoheart knew that her sister and Bumblefrost couldn't see the gap

in their path.

"There is a cliff here. We'll have to jump."

"What?" shrieked Whispersong.

"Are you flea-brained?" Bumblefrost growled. "We should turn back."

"That'd take all day!" Echoheart called over her shoulder.

"Better to waste a day travelling safely than to be dead!" Bumblefrost persisted.

Echoheart ignored them. She slowly closed her eyes and backed up, letting determination fill her muscles as she prepared herself. Her heart thundered in her chest. Then her eyes flashed open and she sprinted forward. She was faintly aware of Whispersong's scream as she leapt off the stone, flying over the tiny waterfall and the canyon it filled. She closed her eyes, and suddenly she slammed into stone. She opened her eyes and saw the smooth, gray surface of the mountains and sighed in relief. She'd made it by a longshot!

"I did it!" she called out triumphantly.

"Great!" growled Whispersong in fear. "Now *we* have to do it!"

"It's okay; it's not that hard!" she yelled.

Whispersong took a deep breath and slowly walked forward, brown eyes wide in fear. Bumblefrost followed her slowly, his tan and black tabby fur bristled along his spine.

Echoheart crouched down as Whispersong sprinted forward, ready to lunge forward and catch her sister if she needed to.

Whispersong sprang off the stone, silver fur whipping in the wind. She extended her claws and landed just in front of Echoheart, sliding on the ice. Echoheart grabbed her scruff and steadied her.

Whispersong looked up gratefully, flanks heaving. "Thanks," she panted.

Echoheart rubbed her muzzle on her sister's head, then meowed, "Bumblefrost is ready."

Whispersong backed away, leaving room for the DayClan warrior to land. Bumblefrost narrowed his pale green eyes and twitched his thick black tail. Then he dashed across the stone, leaping over the gap, and landing just in front of the two she-cats.

Whispersong licked his ragged fur as he came up to her. Echoheart let out a long sigh of relief. They had all made it. They were all safe.

"I've had enough cliff-jumping to last a lifetime, more than a lifetime," Bumblefrost panted shakily, gazing behind him at the cliff, and Whispersong laughed.

* * *

By dusk, the three had come clear of cliffs, canyons, and valleys, and now all that remained were tall, jagged peaks and the flat, snow-covered stone they walked on now.

"Hear that?" Whispersong suddenly asked.

Echoheart twitched her ears. A river!

"Where there's water, there's prey," Bumblefrost purred.

Whispersong raced forward, Bumblefrost and Echoheart close behind.

A large, rushing stream glowed orange in the sunset, and grass and bushes grew from the mud around it. Echoheart gratefully bent down and lapped up the ice-cold water, freezing cold on her tongue.

Suddenly a loud shriek from above caused Echoheart to freeze in terror. She glanced upward and saw a huge bird hovering in the air.

"Eagle!" Bumblefrost shouted.

Echoheart froze, too frightened to move. The eagle was lowering

itself. But it wasn't focusing on her. Echoheart looked around in confusion, but the dark gray rocks and the shadows from the sunset made it nearly impossible to make anything out.

Suddenly a cry filled the air; a *cat's* cry. Echoheart looked around wildly, but it wasn't Whispersong or Bumblefrost. They were standing right beside her, looking just as confused a she was.

A flash of orange fur caught her eye. An orange tabby! It leapt into the air, claws extended toward the eagle. It clawed at its wings, then fell back to the ground again. Another cat leapt up, this time a gray one. This cat gripped the eagle's belly, spinning its tail wildly as it tried to balance and drag the eagle down with its weight. Echoheart watched in awe as the eagle fell to the ground with a shrill cry, then was silenced.

Whispersong glanced at Echoheart. "The cats that overpower eagles."

Echoheart widened her eyes and watched the cats as they dragged the large prey up the rocky slope. "Have we found them?" she whispered.

Bumblefrost was running ahead. "Hey!" he called.

Whispersong ran after him, Echoheart just behind.

The orange cat turned its head and hissed, eyes narrowed. "Who are *you* ?" she snarled in a strange accent, husky and rough like the mountains around them. A silver she-cat and a dark gray tom followed, staring fearfully ahead at the strangers.

Echoheart stepped forward. "We're forest cats. We came from far away, and it's taken us nearly a moon to get here. We think you can help us."

The mountain cats looked at each other. Understanding lit up the silver cat's face. "Of course," she murmured to herself. Then she looked up at them. "The mountains were calling you, were they not?"

"What? How'd you know?" exclaimed Whispersong in surprise.

Echoheart stared wide-eyed at the mountain cat, and Bumblefrost blinked in confusion. The two mountain cats beside her also widened their eyes, and they stared at each other in bewilderment.

The silver she-cat flicked her tail. "Never mind that. You need to come back to the cave with us; Stoneteller will want to see you at once."

Echoheart and Whispersong stared at each other in confusion.

Bumblefrost blinked. "The cave?"

"Yes. Our home. You know, where we sleep."

"I know what home means," retorted Bumblefrost quietly. Whispersong gave him a stern look. "They're acting like we're stupid," he whispered to her angrily.

"It's this way. Upstream," the silver she-cat meowed, leading them up the river. She and her two friends grabbed the eagle in their mouths and began dragging it along.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" the gray tom whispered.

"Stoneteller will understand," the silver she-cat meowed.

"How do you know?" challenged the orange she-cat.

"He told me about this," she whispered, "moons ago. He knew that there would be foreign cats coming."

"Really?" surprise sparked from the two cats. The silver she-cat nodded.

They continued in silence, walking up the rocks, cold now that the sun had set.

"What are your names?" asked Echoheart.

"I'm Rain that Falls From Sky," the silver she-cat meowed, her mouth full of the eagle's feathers.

"What?" asked Whispersong.

"That's a long name!" Echoheart exclaimed.

"What, you don't have those names?" asked the gray tom, turning his amber gaze on the Clan cats.

"No," Echoheart shook her head. "I'm Echoheart."

"Echo Heart," the gray tom repeated quietly to himself. "Huh. And what about you two?" he turned to Bumblefrost and Whispersong.

"I'm Whispersong."

"And I'm Bumblefrost."

The three mountain cats cocked their heads. "I'm not going to remember those," the orange tabby meowed matter-of-factly.

"Well," Echoheart meowed, "I don't remember hers." She pointed to the silver she-cat.

"Rain that Falls from Sky," she repeated, panting. "Or just Rain for short."

"If you go by shorter names," asked Bumblefrost. "Then why do you have such long names? Why not just name your kit Rain, not Rain that... whatever it was?"

"It signifies who we are," Rain stated flatly.

"I'm Flower that Grows from Soil," the orange she-cat told them.

"So Flower for short?" Echoheart asked.

Flower nodded, her orange ears twitching.

Whispersong turned to the gray tom. "And what's your name?"

"Moth that Flies at Night. Moth for short."

The six cats walked on, and soon a loud roaring filled Echoheart's ears. It sounded like the river, only bigger and a *lot* louder. "What

is that?" she asked.

"The waterfall; our cave is behind it," Flower meowed happily, dragging the eagle further and further up the rocky slope.

Echoheart looked ahead. Waterfall? Of course! The StarClan cats had mentioned that the cats that overpowered eagles also lived behind a waterfall! These cat *were* the mountain cats from Echoheart's and Whispersong's dreams!

Bumblefrost suddenly gasped as they walked around a slope of stone and snow.

Whispersong widened her eyes. "Woah!"

Echoheart glanced up. A large, white-foamed waterfall shot water over a cliff rising above them. It thundered on the wet stone, echoing off of the jagged peaks around it. Mist clouded Echoheart's eyes, cold and wet, but she didn't shiver. Instead, joy filled her entire body as she realized that, after nearly two moons of searching, they finally found what they'd left the Clans for!

Echoheart turned to Whispersong and Bumblefrost, and all three cats shared excited glances.

We've found the mountain cats at last!

Rain smiled. "Welcome to the Tribe of Rushing Water."

End of Book 3

The story continues in Book 4: Broken Reflection

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